

THE RADICAL FACE OF DEMOCRATIC LIBERALISM

A STUDY OF COMMUNIST POLITICS IN WEST BENGAL

1947-1977



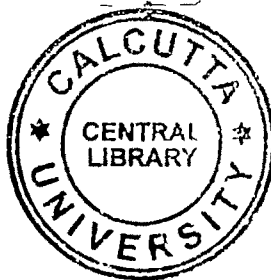
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To
Professor Bhaskar Chakrabarty

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.B.T.A.	– All Bengal Teachers' Association
A.I.C.C.C.R.	– All India Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries
A.I.S.F.	– All India Student Federation
A.I.T.U.C.	– All India Trade Union Congress
B.B.C.	– Biplabi Bangla Congress
B.D.O.	– Block Development Officer
B.P.K.S.	– Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha
B.P.S.F.	– Bengal Provincial Student Federation
B.S.F.	– Border Security Force
CITU.	– Centre of Indian Trade Unions
C.P.C.	– Communist Party of China
C.P.I.	– Communist Party of India
C.P.I. (M.)	– Communist Party of India (Marxist)
C.P.I. (M.-L.)	– Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
C.P.S.U.	– Communist Party of The Soviet Union
C.R.P.	– Central Reserved Police
C.S.P.	– Congress Socialist Party
D.M.	– District Magistrate
I.B.	– Intelligence Bureau
I.N.D.F.	– Indian National Democratic Front
M.A.R.S.	– Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti
M.F.B.	– Forward Bloc (Marxist)
M.I.S.A.	– Maintenance of Internal Security Act
M.L.A.	– Member of Legislative Assembly
M. P.	– Member of Parliament

P.A.	– Personal Assistant
P.C.S.O.	– Presidency College Student Organization
P.D. Act	– Preventive Detention Act
P.D.F.	– Progressive Democratic Front
P.I.F.R.C.	– Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee
P.S.P.	– Praja Socialist Party
P.U.L.F.	– People's United Left Front
R.A.W.	– Research and Analytical Wing
R.C.P.I.	– Revolutionary Communist Party of India
R.S.P.	– Revolutionary Socialist Party
S.B.	– Special Branch
S.D.O.	– Sub-divisional Officer
S.F.	– Student Federation
S.P.	– Socialist Party
S.S.P.	– Sanjukta Socialist Party
S.U.C.	– Socialist Unity Centre
U.C.R.C.	– United Central Refugee Council
U.F.	– United Front
U.L.F.	– United Left Front

Introduction

Themes and Issues

The emergence of a leftist regime with a communist party at its head in June 1977 was perhaps the most significant event in the political history of West Bengal in the post-independence period. The Congress rule which except for two short intervals in 1967 and 1969 had an unbroken tenure of power in the state was terminated by the dramatic collapse in the popularity of the Congress Party following the tyrannical spell of the Emergency Rule under Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977. Yet, the victory of the communists in the Elections of 1977 was not merely an incident of a parliamentary opposition sailing into power through the electoral process. In the party system of Indian democracy the communists had a special position. Unlike the other political groups, they did not accept the existing political structure as sacrosanct. While bidding for power through elections, the communists also entertained a vision of demolishing the framework of parliamentary democracy. The edifice of political democracy in which they operated was also the main target of their ideological offensive. Their electoral practices were conditioned to fulfil the demands of their revolutionary ideology. Naturally the empowerment of a party professing the ideology of subverting the existing political order raises a number of questions: with what expectation did the people bring a revolutionary party to power in an electoral contest? what was the party's strategy in utilizing the electoral process to achieve its revolutionary objectives? to what extent in this power politics were the ideological purity and political praxis blended?

Approaching Indian Communism

The growth of communism as a popular force and the internal complexities of the Communist Party in the post-independence period are the two major features of the politics of West Bengal that had attracted a fair measure of scholarly attention. As regards the larger Indian context, Overstreet and Windmiller have summed up the history of the Communist Party of India as a series of alternatives between 'left' and 'right' policies arising from anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist strategies. The difference between these two strategies, according to them, lies in their attitudes towards bourgeois nationalism. The 'left' strategy which makes capitalism its main target regards bourgeois nationalism as an enemy. The 'right' strategy which aims against imperialism, feudalism and monopoly capitalism regards bourgeois nationalism as an ally. The Indian communist movement, as the authors have traced its evolution from the beginning up to the 1950s, made its choices shifting between the two strategies depending fundamentally upon the goal the party set for itself at a particular moment. When it aimed at merely freeing the country from British rule, it would work with the Congress. When it aimed at achieving power through a socialist revolution, it would work against the Congress. Certainly there was an element of pragmatism in party policies; yet, the 'goal' of the Indian Communist Party, as the authors suggest, has always been conditioned by the goals of the international movement.¹

On a slightly different note, Bhavani Sengupta in his two volumes on Indian communism has identified the main problem before the Indian communists as one of assimilation of the

¹ Overstreet D. Gene and Windmiller Marshall: *Communism in India*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1959

communist doctrine in the national milieu. This, however, according to him, was not unique to the Indian communists or the communists in Bengal but was relevant for any communist movement, when it attained a certain degree of maturity and was determined to make an effort to achieve power. The internal difference among the communists and the consequent division of the party into a number of splinter groups too, according to Sengupta, were the outcome of this quest for legitimacy within the Indian political process, while retaining its links with the international communist movement. Though the legitimacy was sought in different ways, the success came mainly through electoral mobilization. Here the CPI(M) which was formed by breaking away from the CPI in 1964 scored most in comparison with the other splinters that came out of the undivided party. This was largely due to its success in achieving a stronghold in rural West Bengal. But after it achieved legitimacy through the electoral process and became a formidable actor in the electoral game, the Communist Party, according to Sengupta, did not present itself much differently from the Congress Government.²

T. R. Sharma, in tracing the causes of the internal dissension within the Communist Party and its consequent fragmentation, has emphasized the ideological and partisan conflicts among the Indian communists more than the derivative impact of the international happenings in the communist movement. In other words, according to him, the rival communist factions in India identified themselves either with the Chinese camp or with the Soviet house not as an extension of the division of the international communist movement but to resolve the ideological and factional problems of their own. The difference

² Sengupta Bhavani : *Communism in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, : *CPI-M: Promises, Prospects, Problems*, New Delhi, 1979

of opinion between China and the Soviet Union regarding the method of socialist revolution had a ready and direct impact on the Indian communists because they too dissented among themselves in assessing the class role of the various strata of Indian population, and in working out the strategy of the democratic revolution.³

Indian Experience: International Simile

The task of adapting a doctrine to specific national or regional configurations needs some ideological adjustments. This situation is, however, not unique in Indian case but was faced by all Marxist parties striving to fit into specific national conditions. Carl Schorske⁴ and J. P. Nettl⁵ narrated the history of the German Social Democratic Party as a story of its struggle to live up to a radical image amidst parliamentary practices. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) during the last decades of the nineteenth century and up to the First World War was caught by this dilemma.

The SPD subscribed to a basically Marxist analysis of society and politics; postulated an ever-deepening conflict between the exploiters and the exploited; and sought a permanent solution to it through a radical change in the ownership of the means of production. There was, however, a credibility gap between the socialist rhetoric and the social democratic reality. The SPD in its day-to-day propaganda and agitation tended to concentrate on immediate issues and acted essentially as an electoral organization operating in a legal

³ Sharma T. R.: *Communism in India: The Politics of Fragmentation*, New Delhi, 1984

⁴ Schorske Carl: *German Social Democracy 1905-1917*, Harvard, 1955

⁵ Nettl J. P.: *The German Social Democratic Party 1890-1914 as a Political Model, Past & Present-1965* No.-30, Oxford

framework. At the same time it was holding its role as a future revolutionary agency in reserve. And it was through this militant posture that the party combated all sorts of idealistic heresies within its ranks. When the revisionist group led by Bernstein, in the wake of the electoral success of the Social Democrats in the early twentieth century, tried to extend full collaboration with the liberal bourgeois forces, grand condemnation was made. The reformists argued that the party had won its victory not as a mere proletarian party but as a representative of the liberal sector of the middle class as well. Hence the Social Democratic policy should also take care of the interests of this sector. But any attempt to alter or obscure the party's antagonistic attitude toward the existing state and social order and toward the bourgeois parties was prevented for the sake of protecting the 'Sozialistischer Geist' (the socialist spirit). The battle was fought at the ideological level because the German Social Democratic Party in reality never pursued revolutionary politics. Yet, this somewhat forked approach had at one time been widely accepted by the majority of the rank and file. It was not until the failure of the party to effect real revolutionary changes in 1918 that this belief was shaken. Henceforth, the social democratic strategy was showing increasing inclination for legal action at almost any price, whereas the radicals made formal separation from the party and formed the KPD (Communist Party) to pursue revolutionary politics with commitment to undiluted socialist objective.

The reformist heritage of the German Socialist Party upheld and reoriented by the revisionists in Italy, Spain and some other west European countries gave birth to a strand of communism, which is popularly known as Eurocommunism. Though named by Europe, this particular way of communism was enthusiastically followed by some of the advanced capitalist countries outside Europe like Japan and Australia.

In most of the west European countries each of the communist parties at the time of its genesis was considered as an offshoot of the international communist movement and, therefore, was something imposed upon the national political life. The result was that in most cases the communists were looked upon with suspicion. The bourgeois political parties whose class character the communists were striving to expose could easily launch a counterattack by branding the communists as anti-national. The communist advocacy for international fraternity was often misread as a design to sell out the country's national interests. The rule of the dominant classes represented by the bourgeois parties, on the other hand, were made tolerable by their identification with the country's historical tradition and social values. The communist parties in those countries, therefore, had a primary task of linking their political actions to the national traditions of the countries in which they operated. The task was made somewhat easier in the late 1920s with the rise of fascism in west Europe. The fascist terror manifested in brutal dictatorial regimes with aggressive postures in external policy gave the communists an excellent opportunity to link fascism with the anti-people character of bourgeois rule.

Palmiro Togliatti, for example, in finding the Italian road to socialism, apart from theoretical learning on communism made it obligatory for the party militants to acquire knowledge of the national political tradition. As a result, when the bourgeois politics was taken over by the fascist force, it became possible for the Italian communists to project the fascist exponents of the national principle as the betrayers of the nation and the country. But dovetailing the politics of class with national culture often took a toll of ideological militancy.⁶

⁶ Togliatti Palmiro: *On Gramsci and Other Writings*, London, 1979

The ideologues of Eurocommunism began to appreciate the roots and popularity of the bourgeois-parliamentary institutions in the advanced capitalist societies. Consequently, they did not think it wise to overthrow the bourgeois-parliamentary system at a single violent stroke. Nor did they envisage an immediate liquidation of private property. Such a step, according to them, would rather linger or even postpone the chance of a breakthrough towards socialism. On the other hand, the Eurocommunists believed that the nature of these institutions was such that they could be progressively emptied of their class content. As the method of this transformation they suggested the extension of the role of the state in economic life. This gradual take-over by the state would isolate and break big monopolies and enable the progressive forces of the society to unite and to ascend. This democratization of economic life and the participation of the popular progressive forces in the administration of the state would eventually alter the nature of the capitalist system and make the advent of socialism possible. In other words, Eurocommunism believed in the possibility of structural reform through a method of gradual transformation instead of a revolutionary masterstroke.⁷

The Eurocommunist experiment, though it claimed to have been ratified by Kremlin headquarters of the international communist movement, still remained, like Fabian Socialism, a particular brand of communism. It, however, could not become a part of mainstream communist politics which was sympathetic to the practical limitations of these communist parties but did not allow any ideological compromise. Hence the problem of balancing the ideology and practice of Marxism remained a

⁷ Mandel Ernest, translated by Jon Rothschild: *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism*, Paris, 1979

persisting phenomenon among all the communists striving to become a 'true communist'.

This was particularly acute in some of the Asian countries. The Burmese Communist Party which had the longest tradition of Marxist insurgency in South East Asia too could not fully resolve the dichotomy between maintaining ideological purity and adapting to nationalist politics. The different political ideologies and structures in Burma ranging from Aung Sun's democracy to Ne Win's military dictatorship declared socialism as their objective. Therefore, the Communist Party had to mark out the difference of its professed socialism from the 'fake socialism', which the bourgeois governments had pursued. On the other hand, such factors like the strongly rooted ethnic sentiment, the long-standing influence of the Buddhist morality had to be taken into account to make socialism appealing to the popular imagination. In the military regime of Burma the scope of constitutional activities was very limited for the Communist Party and the protracted armed struggle was the only means of survival. But this insurrection could not immediately aim at a socialist goal. It would be the people's democratic revolution which would be led by the proletariat in alliance with all other revolutionary classes and which would be directed against the three enemies – imperialism, feudal-landlordism and bureaucratic capitalism. This revolution did not abandon the socialist objective but considering the imperatives of the present situation kept it in abeyance. However, the Burmese Communist Party, except for inducing occasional outburst mostly at the peripheral territories of the country, could not make much headway in Burmese politics and did not figure as mainstream popular force.⁸

⁸ Smith Charles B. : *The Burmese Communist Party in the 1980s – Issues in Southeast Asian Security*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984

In Malaysia, the Communist Party since its birth in the 1930s followed the tradition of a secret society. Not only organizationally, but socially too, it was a marginal group as its primary hold remained among the Chinese minorities who always suffered from a sense of isolation in the Malay society. It achieved legality only for a short spell of time during the Second World War when the British colonial government itself trained and equipped with arms the communist guerrilla forces (MPAJA-Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army) to fight against the Japanese occupation. It was also during this time that the communists enjoyed some degree of social acceptability, as they became a part of the nationalist struggle on the issue of the anti-Japanese mobilization. But the national image of the communist party did not last long. After the successful recovery of British rule at the end of the war the 'armed communists' appeared to be the most serious threat to the colonial masters. The communists too broadened their anti-fascist struggle into anti-imperialist struggle identifying the British as their primary enemies. The British Government tended to resolve this tension by declaring the Emergency in 1948. This marked the beginning of a full-fledged guerrilla war between the communist contingents and the colonial army. The spirit of contest outlived the colonial regime. Even after the achievement of independence by Malaysia the communist guerrillas continued their fight against the national government alleging it as an agent of foreign imperialism. The struggle ended, however, in complete discomfiture of the communist camp. Indeed, in Malaysia, the Communist Party, despite its proposal for an egalitarian land system and message of human liberation from all sorts of exploitation, could not extend its social base much beyond the Chinese population of the country. It could not evolve a national identity. So during the Emergency too the Malay national parties like the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the

community forces like the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) became engaged in bargaining with the British for transfer of power. But they did not hesitate to support the colonial government in its venture against the communists. The Malay communists, despite their hardcore opposition to British rule, were not accepted as nationalists. On the contrary, even with a socialist programme their class character did not have a firm social root. As a result, the communists were not only disarmed but the hearts and minds of the Malay people too were won against the communists by the colonial authority and later the government of the nation-state.⁹

This problem of adaptation to national and constitutional politics to maintain a widely accepted popular image without falling from the revolutionary standard was so commonly faced by most of the communist parties that Olle Tornquist tried to find out a general formula from the experiments of the different communist groups. In course of his analysis of the communist experiment in Indonesia Tornquist argued that Scientific Marxism which was the classical, original form of Marxism remained as a theoretical dispensation for the communist leaders and workers in different countries. But to make this philosophy usable in specific national conditions they had to evolve various strands of 'Political Marxism'. Lenin, for example, while formulating his colonial thesis, was actually trying to form a guideline for the communist parties in the less developed countries. Tornquist observed that in most of the less developed countries the bourgeoisie along with the nation-state that it might create was found to be the driving force in society. This bourgeois

⁹ Stubbs Richards · *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare-The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960*, Singapore, 1989

nationalism was opposed to imperialism and feudalism, the two main enemies of the communists. Hence temporary and conditional support of the communists to bourgeois national revolution was prescribed. Tornquist also pointed out the fact that there was always a caution about such dealing. The communist parties were instructed to remain prepared for taking a lead whenever the bourgeoisie were found defunct and incapable of organizing a revolution. Thus the political Marxist tradition evolved a tactic of broadening the network of class alliance without deforming its class character. This was the strategy of survival of the communists in those nations where the bourgeoisie still held the rein of the mainstream nationalist politics.

Applying this formula Tornquist assessed the communist movement in Indonesia. Unlike the Burmese communists who remained as a marginal group, the PKI or the Indonesian Communist Party was a major force in the political life of the country. It had the widest popular following of all the Indonesian political groupings. Its core was the urban lower class, ethnically the Javanese. But it also extended its appeal to merchants, religiously orthodox group, members of the lesser aristocracy, wealthier peasants and such unusual sources for the communist support. The popularity, however, did not become a positive factor because the heterogeneous followings were woven into a single fabric only by a common sense of discontent against colonial exploitation and the post-colonial status quo. Naturally such a popular front was susceptible to all sorts of anarchic actions with a revolutionary ideology to legitimize them. The price of this unmotivated unity was an abortive rebellion in the late 1940s that brought the Communist Party to virtual destruction. This compelled the party to change its strategy in

the following decades. The limitations of political independence and the absence of economic liberation of the masses of Indonesia were not denied. But instead of an overt and single-minded opposition to the bourgeoisie as a whole, the nationalist bourgeoisie were relied upon and a positive assessment was made of their political party – PNI. Hence abstaining from militancy, conditional support was given to such progressive steps of the PNI as anti-imperialism, anti-communalism and rejection of parochial regionalism. The rationale for this policy was that the main enemy of the newly independent countries like Indonesia was imperialism. The civil servants, army leaders and the capitalists, however disloyal, corrupt and exploiting they were, did not have any power of their own but executed the interests of an international imperialist network which kept them as indigenous agents. Therefore, by allying with the nationalist bourgeoisie in their struggle against imperialism the communists expected to advance the cause of socialism. In the ‘Guided Democracy’ of 1959 to 1965 in which bourgeois nationalist leader Sukarno became the President in collaboration with the army leadership the PKI also held an influential position. Thus the PKI tried to ensure its survival under the protective cover of a popular government and upheld its radicalism in consonance with the nationalist sentiment of the people.

But the nationalist strategy failed to secure the Indonesian communists from the wrath of army men who did not like the intimacy of the socialists with the bourgeois democratic government and particularly resented the communist protest against the increasing interference of the army in the affairs of the state. When the dissension between Sukarno and the army leaders led to the downfall of the democratic government in the state through a military coup, the army did not spare the political collaborators of Sukarno. They launched an aggressive design against the communists in the middle of the ’60s. The PKI with

its prolonged habit of constitutional politics failed to mobilize a popular militia to resist this onslaught and succumbed helplessly.¹⁰

Communism in West Bengal: Historical Appraisals

The limited success of Eurocommunism, the dismal failure of the PKI, the crippling of the Burmese Communist Party, the marginalization of the MCP, all of which attempted to make a synthesis of radical rhetoric and constitutional practices stand in sharp contrast with the experience of the communists in West Bengal. Here also the main chunk of the Communist Party was avowed to electoralism. But, unlike its European and Asian counterparts, here the party gained sustained power and popularity in electoral politics. At the same time, it successfully upheld its radical creed to enjoy legitimacy in the international communist movement. The experience of the communists in West Bengal has been studied by historians and political scientists in terms of the general development of the communist movement in international perspective and its relations to the specific conditions of India and its regions.

The regional dimension was emphasized by David Laushey who has traced the roots of complexities and conflicts among the communists and the leftists in West Bengal since the terrorist politics of the province in the pre-independence period. An important feature of West Bengal politics in the years immediately following independence or preceding it was the proliferation of small, independent leftist parties professing

¹⁰ i) Tornquist Olle: *What is Wrong with Marxism? On Capitalism and State in India and Indonesia*, New Delhi, 1989

ii) Crouch Harold: *The Trend to Authoritarianism – The Post-1945 Period* Collected from Aveling Harry ed.: *The Development of Indonesian Society*, Qwensland, New Zealand, 1979

allegiance to the communist ideology. Virtually all of these parties drew a substantial chunk of their members from the terrorist groups organized early in the twentieth century. The terrorists themselves credited the intellectual appeal of Marxism with motivating significant changes in their ideological visions. While the ideological attraction of Marxism was important, Laushey drew attention to some other factors of equal or greater importance for inducing the conversion of the terrorists into communists.

In Bengal the terrorist ideas spawned actions by two major parties – *Anushilan* and *Yugantar* – and a few subsidiary groups. From the beginning the terrorist politics in Bengal had its divisions. There was an undercurrent of rivalry between the two parties so that one could not assume a commanding position. Although they held a similar philosophical position on violence as a means of Indian independence, the persistence of disunity in the terrorist movements suggests that the intellectual commitment to an ideology was an insufficient bond of cohesion. Therefore, certain factors other than ideology must have been more important to shape political loyalties. Individual loyalty to a particular leader and to a particular regional subgroup, according to Laushey, was one such factor. The relationship of the party rank and file with their party bosses was an intense, personal and an almost religious bond of loyalty. When the terrorist parties dissolved after late 1930s and most of the terrorists either joined the Congress or retired from active politics and a number of them were initiated into leftism, the older group identities and loyalties still survived. The younger cadres who found their leaders intellectually bankrupt and were inspired by the Marxist ideology did not necessarily discard their political loyalty to the former leaders. In the same way, many of the former party bosses who even though did not wholeheartedly accept leftism nevertheless joined various leftist parties along with the

younger converts. This indicates the bosses' reciprocal loyalty to their groups or at least their desire to retain their old positions of leadership and prestige.

The conversion into leftist ideology, according to Laushey, was also the outcome of the search for power, prestige and respect by the Bengalis as a community. Terrorism had provided a new path to self-esteem for the Bengali youth, no longer content to occupy minor positions in the bureaucracy, especially after the Bengal leadership in the nationalist movement was increasingly challenged by the newly emerging leaders in other parts of the country. As the first generation of terrorists aged and became more interested in past glories than in fresh acts of terror, there arose a new generation of activists who, frustrated by the inaction of the elders, revolted and instituted actions of their own. After their own failure in the early 1930s these younger terrorists turned to political leftism, an ideology, which seemed to explain why they had failed in the past, which provided a clear plan for the future, and which they wished to adopt as a new political path to prestige.¹¹

Laushey's argument was an extension of Marcus Franda's proposition that in the post-independence period too the emotional appeal of Marxism for the Bengali politicians was tuned with their sub-nationalist ambitions. Franda has argued that the twentieth century was, in general, a period of gradual decline of Bengal, and to come to terms with this humiliating experience a search began for a new regional identity and regional political power. Communism as a doctrine sharpened that quest. However, it was the ability of the Bengali revolutionaries to adapt communism and Marxism to their own regional traditions and perceived political needs that explained

¹¹ Laushey David M . *Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left*, Kolkata, 1975

the widespread influence of communism in their state. But though communism found a regional base in Bengal, the goal of the Bengali communists, according to Franda, was not well defined. The Bengali communist movement has been continually wrecked by intense factionalism which explained the adoption of different political tactics and strategies ranging from those of millenarian regionalists to those of the electoral politicians to those of international conspirators. In this atmosphere not only the impact of the movement of the Bengali communists remained confined to the geographical boundary of Bengal but also the Bengali communists themselves were heavily dependent on the Soviet Union and China for extending their gains.¹²

In this respect, a comparable work is T. J. Nossiter's study about the development of communism in Kerala – another state of India, where communism achieved the status of the ruling establishment. Nossiter has raised a few points which were not only central to the *Malayali* communism but may be useful for the study of communism in West Bengal. Nossiter, like Franda, has linked the Keralite communism with a sub-national search for identity, which, particularly after independence, was induced by a sense of discontent against an oppressive and unsympathetic Central Government. But, according to Nossiter, the base of communism was laid in Kerala long before the achievement of independence through a process of social mobilization. Since the beginning of the twentieth century Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalan Yogom (SNDP) which was essentially a caste association cultivated a new social identity especially among the low caste *ezhavas* through the promotion of education and the growth of consciousness about the various forms of economic exploitation like deprivation of land ownership,

¹² Franda Marcus : *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge & Massachusetts, 1971

servitude carried in the name of caste rules. The political ideology and action of the Congress Party in the state failed to cope with the new social vision, whereas the success of the Communist Party lay in translating the social spirit of a regenerated community into a political creed. The Communist Party not only initiated a section of the SNDP leadership into militancy but also linked it with the other popular groups nourishing a radical vision and thus created a unity of popular struggle for progress that transcended all caste and communal considerations. It was this successful popular mobilization around the dominant economic and social issues that made communism a part of the mainstream political life.

However, Nossiter has made one point clear. He has argued that, despite the successful adaptation of electoral politics and the achievement of power through electoral success in Kerala, electoralism of the communist forces has not been divorced from other forms of struggle. In this respect Kerala, according to Nossiter, contrasted with West Bengal where except for a small group of communist revolutionaries and Naxalites all communists have accepted the inevitability and the propriety of electoral politics. But in Kerala even those communists who participated in electoral politics, in Nossiter's view, treated the parliamentary institutions as instruments of struggle. Nossiter, therefore, found the process of development of communism in this southern Indian state culminating in the creation of a distinctive Kerala communism. It is committed to both representative democracy and active socialism, has adapted to the peculiar structures of *Malayali* society and culture, and therefore, is not merely an Asian analogue of Eurocommunism.¹³

¹³ Nossiter T. J.: *Communism in Kerala*, New Delhi, 1982

Anjali Ghosh writing a little after the Left Front Government came to power in West Bengal in 1977 has counted the coalition politics as the clue to electoral success of the Left Front in the state. Between 1967 and 1977 through two short trials of empowerment and through various shifts and turns of alliances this coalition force consolidated itself as an alternative to the Congress. The partners of this coalition, as they stood in 1977, were all believers in some strand of leftism and committed to fit this ideology to the political culture of the state. While their leftist vision attracted particularly the young section of the population with a vow to electoral politics, they strode for the peaceful transition to socialism. Despite appreciating this strength of the coalition, Anjali Ghosh has also indicated the loopholes of this system. She has argued that the opposition forces coalesced against the Congress not for ideological unity but out of a political compulsion since no single party had the majority strength to form the government. Hence she suspected that the coalition making, though it seemed to be an unavoidable political process in the state in future, would not play a positive role, and only create a lot of instability and confusion.¹⁴

As our experience unfolded, the coalition politics not only became a sustained tradition but emerged as a stabilizing force in the politics of the state. This stability, according to Ross Mallick, was achieved through a major ideological compromise that was apparent in the failure of the Communist Parties to work out a balancing strategy between its emancipatory ideals and constitutional practices. In his survey of Indian communism he has focused mainly on West Bengal and traced this failure even before the empowerment of the Left Front in 1977. The radical and precipitous actions of the ultras could not be

¹⁴ Ghosh Anjali: *Peaceful Transition to Power. A Study of Marxist Political Strategies in West Bengal (1967-1977)*, Kolkata, 1981

sustained for long in the face of organized repression of the state. Electoral success, on the other hand, depended on the formation of multi-party alliance and the extension of vote bank even among the so-called class enemies. This constrained the Communist Parties to undertake any vigorous initiative for the benefit of the poor and the depressed classes. The result, in Mallick's opinion, was that in the Left Front's programme of reforms the biggest beneficiaries appear to be the rural middle class and sections of the urban lower and middle class both in Government services and public sector enterprises. According to Marxist theory, the middle peasantry should be only auxiliary supporters to whom benefits are given to prevent them from joining the rural rich. But in West Bengal, rather than being secondary, these rural classes have become the dominant class with only transitory and secondary benefits filtering down to the agricultural labourers and the poor peasants. In this context Mallick has found the ideological impulses that had divided the party in 1964 gradually disappearing with the self-interests and ego-clash of the leaders standing in the way of reunification.¹⁵

Amitabha Chandra makes similar points when he argues that excessive electoralism has weakened the ideological militancy of the Communist Parties in West Bengal. According to him, the communists utilized the parliamentary means as a tactical weapon to strengthen their struggle for complete social change. But the success in electoral politics made them obsessed with electoral gains and consequently led them to abandon the extra-parliamentary means of struggle. In this context, he has attributed the parliamentary success of the Communist Parties

¹⁵ Mallick Ross. *Indian Communism*, New Delhi, 1994

not exclusively to the struggle of the Communist Parties but has marked it as a triumph of the entire left movement and as an extension of the democratic forces.¹⁶

The relevance of leftist tradition to the politics of West Bengal forms the central theme in the argument of Sudhir Ray whose analysis covers a long period from 1947 to 2001, and finds the scope of comparing the role of the Marxist parties in opposition and in government. His findings assure him of the strength of leftist mobilization that not only led the Marxist parties to emerge as a powerful opposition to the Congress in parliamentary politics but eventually enabled it to form alternative governments in successive elections. Though he has differentiated between political mobilization and social hegemony, the latter being identified as an incomplete domain of leftist intervention, he counts the leftist impact on the politics of West Bengal as a positive, stabilizing as well as continuing phenomenon.¹⁷

From these different sets of interpretations certain points are clear. The development of the communist movement in India before as well as after independence revolved round the central issue of maintaining a balance between loyalty to the international guidelines and the application of an ideology to the Indian conditions. This complex task gave birth to oscillations and differences of opinion among the partymen and consequently broke the unity of the movement. West Bengal where the communist-led Left Front enjoyed the largest spell

¹⁶ Chandra Amitabha: *Swadhinata Parabartee Communist Andolonor Panchash Bachar* (Fifty Years of the Communist Movement after Independence) Collected from Chaudhuri Kamal (ed). *Swadhinata Panchash Perie* (Independence after Fifty), Kolkata, 1999.

¹⁷ Ray Sudhir: *Marxist Parties of West Bengal in Opposition and in Government* (1947-2001), Kolkata, 2007

of governmental power felt most intimately the impact of the shifts and turns of the movement. Some scholars, as the earlier analysis has shown, have pointed out the lessening intensity of the ideological fervour of the communist policy in the state. They are true as far as the electoral programmes of the parties are concerned. But the question still remains why in party literature there is no approval of the dissolution of the revolutionary objective.

The Crux of The Matter

This dichotomy between the ideals and praxis that has become a consistent feature of the Communist Parties in West Bengal makes us curious about the true nature of communism in this state. The quest of the true nature of communism in West Bengal is very much related to the questions mentioned in the early part of this narrative. How did the Communist Party figure to the people as well as to the party ranks and how far the party's political practices were in accordance with its ideological propositions – these are some vital issues in probing the real nature of the communist movement in the state. The present work focuses on this problem of characterization. It is concerned with the period 1947-1977 and the narrative is divided into eight chapters:

First it looks at the backdrop against which communism emerged and gradually consolidated its place in Indian politics during the years before independence. This chapter shows how in the process of developing a popular identity the Communist Party confronted a crucial problem of balancing its class character with the nationalist perception of a political party. Sometimes, as during the Second World War, these two concerns ran against one another and alienated the Communist Party from the mainstream nationalist politics. On other occasions, however, particularly during such national crises as the famine of 1943,

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the communal riots of 1946-47 the dedication of the communists to the cause of the depressed humanity reinforced their populist image. At the same time, mobilizing the peasants, workers and other exploited sections of population on their class issues the Communist Party sustained its radical message.

Chapter 2 reveals the story of the encounter of the Communist Party with the Indian nation-state. Starting with a radical posture of debunking independence as 'sham liberty' the Communist Party gradually adapted to the priorities of parliamentary politics. However, the Communist Party achieved its distinctiveness by evolving an alternative political model. Mobilizing various sections of population on such issues like refugee rehabilitation, injustice of the land system, recurrent food crisis, exploitation of the factory labourers, the Communist Party exposed the discriminatory nature of the Central Government and the oppressive policy of the state government, held by the Congress Party. The communist alternative posed a challenge to the Congress when the Communist Party decided to participate in the country's first general election after independence. Along with the constitutional practice, however, the Communist Party upheld its radical rhetoric and thus continued to project its revolutionary image.

Chapter 3, in continuation of the earlier chapter, touches on the earnest effort by the Communist Party to maintain a balance between its revolutionary vision and electoral ambition. Militant mobilization of the masses in various spheres ranging from the rehabilitation of the refugees to the proposed unification of Bengal and Bihar brightened the prospect of the Communist Party as an alternative to the Congress in the electoral politics of the state. Alongside mass politics, however, the Communist Party carried on continuous ideological propaganda to legitimize its constitutional practices. The emancipatory ideal of the

Communist Party with the promise of a revolutionary change approved of the constitutional practices as the means to ensure some immediate relief to the people. Despite parliamentarism, the political identity they wished to project was substantially moulded by the language of class.

Chapter 4 deals with the internal crisis of the Communist Party and its consequent split in 1964. The causes of this division have been traced in the combination of multiple factors of ideological and personal dimension. The impact of the international events centring round the ideological debate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of China, the growing dissension among the leaders of the Communist Party of India on various national issues and the acute factional rivalries among the party members divided the party. The two houses advocated two different ways of achieving socialism. While analysing the difference of the two programmes, the present narrative has also pointed out the limitations of both of them in striking out a balance between revolution and election, a problem that haunted the Communist Party in India since its birth.

The empowerment of the Communist Parties through an anti-Congress coalition in the two successive elections of 1967 and 1969 have been discussed in Chapter 5. Apparently, these electoral ventures were not successful because both of these coalition regimes were cut short by acute factionalism among the partners of the coalition and the authoritarian treatment by the Central Government of an anti-Congress force. But even during that short period the communists could infuse a radical spirit in the parliamentary mechanism and placed before the people a new idea of governance moulded by the ideology of class.

Chapter 6 deals with the Naxalite upsurge. While detailing the background, features and the limitations of the Naxalite movement, the present narrative also reads the significance of this radical outburst as a denominator of the ideological position of the mainstream Communist Parties.

Chapter 7 narrates the story of the final bid for power by the communists to form a leftist regime which came to power through the Elections of 1977 and has remained in power till date. In this electoral power-game, however, one faction of the communists, the CPI(M), achieved a hegemonic position. While the Naxalites crumbled in the face of repression, the CPI too was delegitimized for its collaborationist strategy vis-à-vis the unpopular Congress Government. The CPI(M), on the other hand, showed remarkable resilience to survive the onslaught of tyranny after the rigged Elections of 1972 and during the Emergency. During these critical years the CPI(M) silently but steadily carried on its populist activities through social mobilization. This identification of the CPI(M) with the suffering humanity finally ensured the credibility of its alternative political model as the symbol of democracy and social justice. This work concludes with an explanation of the evolution of the nature of ideology and action of communism. The departure from the revolutionary path and the adoption of an electoral strategy as a means of social transformation and capturing political power was a major ideological revision, although not entirely novel. As it happened in other contexts, it was also recognition of the fact that the capitalist institutions could be utilized to achieve the goal of socialism. There was no need, therefore, to effect a violent destruction of the capitalist order and build up a socialist state on a blank space. More so, the parliamentary communism in West Bengal upheld a programme which the bourgeois liberalism had already conceptualized as its political norm but failed to translate it into an administrative policy. It was the

assurance to fulfil the promises of the bourgeois democracy that brought constitutional socialism to power. Abolition of privileges in politics, society and economy, guarantee of protection of basic human rights, disposition of wealth in such a manner as to ensure the subsistence of even the lowest stratum of the society – all of which formed the basis of a welfare state – had been the goals of all great victories of bourgeois liberalism such as in the English, American and the French Revolutions. The constitutional socialists revived this dream and promised its realization through a process of gradual and peaceful transformation of the capitalist statecraft into an instrument of socialism. Seen from this angle, the parliamentary communism, i.e., communism without the strategy of revolution, was an idealized form of the bourgeois liberal democracy.

But the novelty of constitutional socialism was that this democratic promise was articulated within the framework of a revolutionary ideology. In other words, though revolution could not be accomplished immediately, it was expected by the communists that the so-called democratic experiments would prepare the ground for achieving the revolutionary objective. In practice it meant that the parliamentary methods would be a substitute for revolutionary actions; but a revolutionary rhetoric had to be upheld. And the working out of a balancing strategy to fit the electoral practices to a revolutionary ideal became the most serious challenge to the Communist Party throughout the period under discussion. This created some serious complications in the internal organizations of the party. The debate and division among the party ranks arose primarily out of their different attempts to resolve the tension between political practices and professed ideologies.

Now that this consistent pursuit of an ideal whose transformation into a reality became a far-off possibility naturally enthralls us to explore the compulsions of the Communist Party

to sustain this ideological stand. The adaptation of the communist doctrine to the regional peculiarities of West Bengal can be explained by the necessity of the party for its survival in the mainstream politics of the state. The urgency for the reiteration of the revolutionary phrases and rhetoric is another problem that attracts scholarly inquisitions and has been addressed in the present narrative.

To deal with this problem we need to address some other questions as well. To what extent the experiences and the experiments of the communists of West Bengal differed from those in other countries on similar occasions is one such question. The probing into this matter would be a clue to understanding the distinctiveness of communism in West Bengal. On the other hand, the impact of the communist politics on the political development of the state of West Bengal is another important matter to ponder over. The emphatic and consistent reference to a revolutionary objective by a party which operated within the parliamentary framework was also a new experience for the parliamentary politics. In other words, communism modified its classical form to survive in parliamentary politics. In the same way, the intrusion of a radical ideology and a militant party organization into the structure of parliamentary politics introduced a new experiment in parliamentary democracy. How parliamentary politics in the State of West Bengal developed a new face under the tutelage of a radical political party is another question that has been addressed in this book.

One last point needs to be mentioned about sources of information. In view of the non-availability of government sources from 1960s onwards I have depended largely on memoirs, newspapers and interviews. I have used a number of vernacular sources the extracts from which have been translated into English by me. The translation, however, is not always literal but tries to express the sense of the passage.

Chapter - I

The Backdrop (1920-1947)

The Emerging Force

The foundation of the Communist Party of India at Tashkent in 1920 with the support of the Soviet Communist Party was not an event of any immediate political significance in Indian political life. Thirty-five years ago the foundation of the Indian National Congress had generated much greater optimism and enthusiasm, at least among the literate classes of India for its prospective role in the anti-colonial struggle. But this spirit did not mark the immediate response to the establishment of a communist party in a distant land under the tutelage of a foreign country. It was the brainchild of a group of migrants and exiles, who came in touch with the Soviet Party and saw the rise of the first Communist State from very close quarters. During the early years the Communist Party remained somewhat isolated from the mainstream nationalist movement and was unable to create an organization capable of achieving the broader objectives of the classes and the masses.

Yet, the communists succeeded, much before the Congress leadership in introducing a radical content in the nationalist movement. In 1922 when the Indian National Congress was still groping for an appropriate definition of *swaraj*, M. N. Roy¹

¹ M. N. Roy, whose original name was Narendranath Bhattacharya, had joined the freedom struggle as a member of *Jugantar*, a secret revolutionary organization of Bengal. As a close associate of Jatindranath Mukherjee, a famous leader of revolutionary nationalism, he took an active part in the conspiracy made by the Indian revolutionaries to uproot the British Raj during the World War I. But as the conspiracy was divulged to the British Government and consequently their group fizzled out, Roy was absconding in the U.S.A. and Mexico. There he came into touch with the Marxists and the literature of Marxism. Subsequently, he became one of the first Indian communists and attended the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 (Persits M. A.: *Revolutionaries of India in Soviet Russia*, Moscow, 1973)

submitted in the Gaya session of the Congress a Programme of national liberation in unambiguous terms.² The conversion of a number of revolutionary terrorists into communist activists made communism in Bengal as well as in India a force to reckon with. Also the examples of self-sacrifice by the communists on such dramatic occasions like the Kanpur Conspiracy Case (1924) and the Merrut Conspiracy Case (1930) evoked considerable popular sympathy. The communists utilized such occasions to create a space for them in the public arena. During the trials of the Meerut Conspiracy Case the detenus used the courtroom as a platform for propagating their ideologies.³

²Programme of National Liberation-submitted by M. N. Roy to Gaya Congress in 1922.

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol -I, Kolkata, 1997. The statement is the following:

“Our movement has reached a stage when the adoption of a definite programme of national liberation as well as of action can no longer be deferred. A programme of national liberation must be formulated in order to state the position of those who do not believe in halfway and the so-called “evolutionary” methods advocated by the compromising liberals. The ambiguous term *swaraj* is open to many definitions, and in fact it has been defined in various ways according to the interests and desires of the different elements participating in our movement. Such a vague objective is certainly not conducive to the strengthening of a movement: on the contrary it makes for weakness. Therefore a militant programme of action has become indispensable in order to mobilise under the banner of National Congress all the available revolutionary forces. The nation is not a homogenous whole: it is divided into classes with diverse and often conflicting interests. All these various social classes struggle for their respective interests. They all believe that national liberation will remove their grievances. Therefore, the programme of the National Congress, which is not a cohesive political party but the traditional organ of our national struggle, cannot be according to the interests of one certain class. The National Congress is a coalition of all forces oppressed by foreign domination, therefore its programme must be a coalition programme.”

³ Ahmad Muzaaffar : *Amar Jivan O Bharater Communist Party (Pratham Khanda) (My Life and The Communist Party of India, Vol I)*, Kolkata, 1996

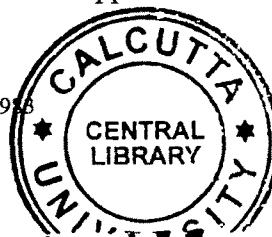
The Communist Party even at that stage had the character of a secret society comparable to some of the earlier secret societies at the turn of the century. It was one important reason why the Colonial State looked upon the communists as a dangerous enemy and the party was outlawed in 1934.

Around the middle of the 1930s certain new directions in the nationalist mobilizations created new opportunities for the communists to penetrate into the nationalist mainstream without which popular support for them was hard to come by. During the decade of the '30s as a part of the party building programme the peasants', workers' and the students' wings of the party were set up. Even the Indian National Congress came to be infected by this new radical wave. A group of young Congressmen, while serving prison term in early 1930s, studied Marxism and were attracted to socialist ideas. In 1934 the Congress Socialist Party was founded.⁴

Changing Stances

One important outcome of the communist strategy to forge links with the nationalist mainstream was a certain acceptance of the communists in the political public sphere. Changes in the organizational form and in the programme of the Communist Party contributed to the diffusion of their ideology beyond the narrow limits of the fellow travelers. The strategy to form alliances with the bourgeois parties of the nationalist mainstreams was an important feature of this programmatic change. Instead of a single-minded opposition to the bourgeoisie as a class, the popular support for the nationalist bourgeoisie and their leadership in the anti-colonial struggle was appreciated.

⁴ Sarkar Sumit: *Modern India (1885-1947)*, New Delhi, 1983



Consequently the idea of collaboration with the bourgeoisie for extending the popular base of the Communist Party was optimistically assessed.

Already in the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 (July 19-August 7) Lenin had drawn attention to the potentialities of bourgeois politics in the colonial world to become the basis for a more generalized kind of popular movement for achieving some of the class demands of the proletariat. On that occasion his thesis was challenged by an Indian communist – M. N. Roy.⁵ Later Roy revised his views and propounded a twofold programme of building a broad-based people's party which was to work in clear collaboration with a workers' and peasants' party of purely communist identity. Roy's ideas regarding collaboration, however, did not get the approval of the Comintern. When Roy came to see enough political reason in Lenin's collaborationist strategy and had started pleading for it, Moscow's stance on this question had become harder. After Lenin's death Stalinist leadership had rejected the idea of collaboration; the Soviet leadership, however, changed their stance once again in the mid-1930s with the Comintern's directive in the Seventh Congress (1935) in favour of a broad anti-imperialist united front.⁶

⁵ Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions. July 26, 1920.

The Commission formed by the Second Congress of the Communist International included representatives of the communist parties of Russia, Bulgaria, France, Holland, Germany, Hungary, the USA, India, Persia, China, Korea and Britain. The work of the Commission was guided by Lenin, whose thesis on the national and colonial questions were discussed at the fourth and fifth sessions of the Congress and were adopted on July 28, 1920: V. I. Lenin Compiled in: Lenin V. I.: *Collected Works*, Vol-31, Moscow, 1966

⁶ Datta Gupta Sobhanlal: *Comintern, India and the Colonial Question (1920-1937)*, Kolkata, 1980 & *History of the Communist Movement in India (Vol. 1: The Formative Years, 1920-1933)*, New Delhi, 2005).

In other words, instead of clinging to a dogmatic position that might lead to marginalization, the Communist Party was becoming aware of the necessity to reach out to the people. That explains their keenness to use those parties and organizations, which were not proletarian in class character but had a general acceptability to the people. In the European context the attempt to harness all types of mass organizations under a common umbrella of anti-imperialist struggle was induced by the growing fear of fascism.

For the Indian communists this international directive was seen to be relevant in their national contexts. Up to the late 1920s the Indian communists were too sceptical about the bourgeoisie. The detenus of the Meerut Conspiracy Case, while explaining the communist strategy during their trials, characterized the bourgeoisie and the feudal landlords as the two main pillars of the colonial empire in India and, therefore, ruled out the possibility of making an alliance with them in the struggle against British imperialism. The programme of national revolution, which the communists chalked out to oust the British from India, was designed to be carried out by the peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and the working class under the leadership of the working class. The radical anti-imperialist struggle was by nature expected to go against the indigenous allies of imperialism.⁷ So, though the communists at this phase were aware of the necessity to unite the overwhelming majority of the population to make the revolution a victorious one, they had reservations about selecting the classes for this revolutionary unity.

⁷ Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929 – Examination of Muzaffar Ahmad National Archives Serial No-254

The emergence of a number of small left groups and the adoption of the socialist programme by the mainstream political parties like the Congress in the mid 1930s led the Communist Party to rethink its dogmatic approach. Of course, the Congress Socialist Party did not identify itself with the CPI. Nor did it dissociate itself from the Congress. The Communist Party too was critical of the CSP and sustained its points of ideological difference from the Congress experiment with socialism in no uncertain terms. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, whose early political career was engaged with Congress socialism, but, who later became one of the founding figures of the Kerala unit of the Communist Party of India, made his assessment of the Congress Socialists in terms of class. He accused the CSP of being devoid of any concept of class struggle – a principle on which the foundation of the Communist Party had been laid. He commented:

“For them (CSP) class struggle is an economic struggle conducted through trade unions and other mass organizations. Behind this lay hidden the thinking that class relations have no relevance in the struggle for independence. The Congress Socialist refused to perceive the fact that the bourgeoisie and the working class were in conflict with each other even in the freedom struggle, that the bourgeois political leadership exerted influence not only on the peasantry and other sections of the petty bourgeois elements, but also on the rear section of the working class and that the task of the communists and socialists was to rally the masses in the anti-imperialist revolutionary camp through struggles against the influence of the bourgeoisie. They expected that the Indian National Congress, the instrument of the struggle of the bourgeoisie and which emerged out of the development of the bourgeoisie, would turn itself into an instrument for the struggle for socialism.

The Communists could not but oppose these views. Exposing the approach of the Congress Socialists of transforming the Congress into a socialist organization, the Communists said that the Congress was the political party of the bourgeoisie and it would be a self-deception and a betrayal of the people to attempt to make it accept socialism. They further

pointed out that the task of communists and socialists was to effectively oppose the vacillations and deception of the Congress by organizing the ranks as well as the anti-imperialist elements under its leadership.”⁸

In other words, the Communist Party was not ready to recognize the CSP as adequately communist. Nor did the Communist Party share the optimism of the CSP to transform the Indian National Congress into a socialist organization by gradually reorienting its programme along the socialist line. Yet, this very attempt to modify the bourgeois strategy with a socialist tinge by the bourgeois organizations themselves was the proof of the growing popularity of the communist ideology.

This popularity of the ‘ism’ of the communists and the affirmative response of the political parties to this new popular discourse, however, could have a negative bearing upon the development of the Communist Party. The Communist Party had to be defensive against the appropriation of its ideology by the other political parties. Otherwise, these parties some of whom had a wider influence on the people than what had been enjoyed by the Communist Party could override the latter. On the other hand, by carefully exploiting the socialist turn of these political parties the Communist Party could launch a joint struggle with them and use their popular channels to propagate communist ideas and programmes. Following the guideline of the international agencies of the communists the Communist Party of India took up the second alternative and the concept of a united front with an anti-imperialist objective emerged.

This, however, did not mean that the Communist Party discarded the principle of class struggle and abandoned the ideology of revolutionary politics. Rather the party viewed the

⁸ Namboodiripad E.M.S : *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, Tirubanataparam, 1993, pp. 340-341

class struggle as a historical process. Hence, in its opinion, the revolutionary tactics should be formulated in accordance with the degree of intensification of class antagonism and the people's consciousness of it. While the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was not resolved, the frontal attack on the bourgeoisie as the class enemy was still envisaged as the final phase of the proletarian struggle. But before reaching this final phase of the struggle, which was preconditioned by a certain degree of maturity of class conflict, the Communist Party could work out a strategy for the intermediate phase of struggle. The Communist Party at this phase could not ignore the vanguard role of the bourgeoisie in the nationalist struggle. By sharing the ideology of anti-imperialism the communists could strike temporary alliances with the bourgeoisie in order to rally popular support.

Populism and its Advantages

The line of collaboration immediately paid rich dividends. The communists got as a result greater public exposure and even under conditions of illegality managed to participate in large-scale public activities. The distinguished leader of the CPI – Bishwanath Mukherjee – who was a young cadre of the party in the '30s, remembers this phase in the history of the party as one of expansion and growing importance in public life:

“In my opinion, the years from 1936 to 1940 constituted the most glorious period for the Communist Party. Though theoretically the party was still illegal, it became possible during this period to work openly and extensively among the different sections of population, particularly among the labourers, peasants and students, and to mobilize radical movements and mass organizations. It was during this period that the All India Trade Union Congress led by the reformist leadership and the communist led Red Trade Union became united, and under the new leadership of the All India Trade Union Congress the communist and other leftist forces could establish their influence. The labour class attained a new degree of consciousness.

During the same period the communists, along with the other peasant leaders, founded All India Krishak Sabha.

...It was also during this period that the revolutionary ideology of the working class inspired the student activists of the communist and other left parties, who launched a joint action to produce a new type of radical and continuous movement and organization among the student masses. This action of the student community that raised a war cry of liberty, peace, progress and democracy found its leadership in the All India Student' Federation."⁹

It was during this phase that a number of revolutionaries joined the communist camp. These revolutionaries most of whom started their political career under the banner of the Congress and later left it due to disillusionment with the politics of non-violence found in the doctrine of communism a new ideology of protest. They were attracted to communism because they found a logical and emotional link between the nationalist struggle for freedom from foreign rule and the class struggle for the liberation of the oppressed humanity. Prabhat Chakravorty who was one of such converted communists and became an eminent figure in the party in later years explained to one of his friends about the source of inspiration behind his initiation in following terms:

"How many times have I thought over and over again before deciding to join the Communist Party. Steeped in my ego, what a lot of prejudices have I borne against the Party before accepting its leadership. But I woke up only when I realised what a great heritage of sacrifice runs throughout its history. Heroes without number have dedicated their lives at its altar – with their very blood they have dyed red the great banner of the Party carrying a magnificent tradition behind it. That is why throwing away all doubts and hesitations I have accepted this Party as the highest body that can help me

⁹ Datta Bhanudev & others ed.: *Bishwanath Mukherjee: Tattwa O Sangramer Pratik* (Bishwanath Mukherjee. A Symbol of Ideology as well as Struggle), Kolkata, 1999, p. 135

to achieve my cherished ideal. All that is great and noble in our national tradition is bound up with it.”¹⁰

So, it was not only ‘a great heritage of sacrifice’ that attracted a dedicated fighter to a doctrine but the identification of what was great and noble in his national tradition with this ideal of universal emancipation that turned a nationalist activist into a communist cadre.

Almost the same spirit was reflected in the writings of Rasamay Majumdar, another converted communist, who recounted his experience in the Baxa Detention Camp:

“Two I.C.S. officers, named Leolin and Cadman, who came as assistant commandants, acted to mould the minds of the prisoners. They supplied us with such essential things like dress, food, books and requisitions, and in the process maintained close contact with us. We discussed many topics with them. Their objective was to keep us engaged in studies and thus to divert our attention from the revolutionary ideas. The Marxist literature was planned to be used as a device to change our political belief. But the calculation misfired. Rather many of us found in this philosophy a new source of enlightenment.”¹¹

¹⁰ Sen Niranjana: Bengal’s Forgotten Warriors

Collected from Sur Prasanta ed: *Biplabi Prabhat Chakraborty Smarana O Manane* (Prabhat Chakraborty: A Revolutionary in memory and spirit), CPI(M) Kolkata District Committee, 2002, p. 208

As a schoolboy of Coomilla of present Bangladesh, Prabhat Chakraborty was initiated into the freedom struggle. Though his natural inclination was for armed struggle and he became a part of the *Anushilan Samiti*, he also actively participated in the rural programme of the Gandhian Congress. Later in Andaman Jail in the 1930s he was attracted to the Marxism. For the rest of the life he became a Marxist and an active member of the Communist Party.

¹¹ Mazumdar Rasamay: *Noakhali Dinlipi – Swadhinata Sangram O Communist Party* (Diary of Noakhali – Freedom Struggle and The Communist Party), Kolkata, 2002, p. 14

Rasamay Mazumdar, a resident of Noakhali of present Bangladesh, joined the freedom struggle as a member of *Yugantar*. During his imprisonment at Baxa Detention Camp and other jails he was introduced to Marxist literature. After his release in 1937 he participated in various socialist activities and in 1939 became the member of the Communist Party.

Instead of wiping out the nationalist sentiment of the revolutionary terrorists, as the British Raj had expected, the Marxist literature strengthened the ideological fervour of the nationalist struggle by linking it up with the worldwide struggle of oppressed humanity. And it was through this nationalization of a universal doctrine that communism founded its intellectual and popular base in Bengal.

This popular dimension of the early communist mobilization was undermined, when the communists withdrew from the mainstream nationalist politics and apparently betrayed the nationalist cause in the name of supporting the British allies of the Soviet Union against Germany during the Second World War. The popular image of the party was severely damaged and it was not until the extensive relief work and mass welfare activities under their auspices during the Famine of 1943 and the communal riots of 1946 that the Communist Party became emotionally acceptable to the people.¹²

Focusing the Issues

The renewal of the popular link of the Communist Party resulted in a large-scale mobilization around economic and political issues involving various layers of the population. On agrarian front the party envisioned a system of co-operative farming and collective ownership of land. A pamphlet issued by the Communist Party in 1946 outlined this agrarian objective before the people:

“The process through which the Communist Party has envisaged to restructure the agrarian system of India is to merge the numerous small plots of land into large mechanically operated agricultural co-operatives.

¹² Tripathi Amalesh' *Swadhinata Sangrame Bharater Jatiya Congress 1885-1947* (Indian National Congress and The Struggle for Freedom), Kolkata, 1990

This change alone can ensure the emancipation of the peasant families from poverty and the foundation of the agrarian system of our country on a stable basis. This will lead to the creation of a modern rural society in which the peasants, artisans and labourers will work together, be the part of a common agricultural farm and will receive just wage.”

But the party emphatically mentioned that it was an ambitious project and its implementation needed not only agrarian reconstruction but also a wholesome change in economy and polity. The pamphlet specified this programme in the following words:

“But the successful execution of this grand design is preconditioned by the foundation of a people’s state, which would take bold initiative for full-scale industrialization through nationalization of capital industries, transport and mines, and for agricultural expansion through the eviction of the *zamindars* (landlords), nationalization of their property and the distribution of new colonies and uncultivated land among the agrarian labourers.”¹³

The communist leadership felt that the basic condition to end the agrarian exploitation was to endow the cultivators with concrete tangible rights in land. But this was not achievable without the liquidation of the *zamindari* system, which was the main agency of exploitation by concentrating land in the hands of the rentier class. This fight against feudal forces could again logically relate itself to the struggle of the industrial proletariat against capitalist domination. In communist perception there was a fundamental antagonism between feudalism and bourgeois capitalism. Yet, in the context of an incomplete development of capitalism in India, especially in the rural sector, the exploiting forces of capitalism learnt to coexist with the vestiges of feudalism by making the peasantry a common target of

¹³ Adhikari G : *Sakaler Khadya Chai* (1946) (We Need Food for Everyone)
A pamphlet collected from S. B. Records, file – CPI Students and Youths

exploitation. So, any attempt to destroy the exploitative network in agriculture was bound to be a double-edged weapon against feudal landlordism and agrarian capitalism. Again, the struggle for agrarian emancipation could not be fought in isolation. The logic and framework of exploitation, which operated in agricultural society, had reproduced itself in industrial field. Therefore, to make the struggle for agrarian emancipation successful it was also necessary to open a simultaneous battle against the injustice in industrial field. Naturally this would require a joint venture of the proletariat from both industrial and agricultural sectors. Just as the capitalists, despite their apparent abhorrence for feudalism, could ally with the landlords on a common identity of the exploiting class, there was a possibility of natural alliance between the peasants and the workers to launch a joint venture against a system of exploitation.

Furthermore, the whole network of exploitation was sustained by the state, which, according to the Marxist version, consisted of the representatives of the landlords and the capitalists and, therefore, acted as the instrument through which the exploitation was inflicted. The discussion on the struggle for economic emancipation inevitably raised the question or the issue of the political task involved in the dissolution of the class character of the Indian state and making it a popular democracy in the true sense of the term. Thus the emancipatory message of the Communist Party was delivered in the language of class. And the way to achieve the goal of economic socialism was to be shown through the course of revolutionary politics undertaken by the collective effort of the economically exploited classes.

Consequently the Communist Party concentrated on large-scale mass mobilization around agrarian and economic demands. The politicization of the economic issues and the making of

armed popular struggle acquired a revolutionary pitch at Telengana in Andhra in 1946. Though this struggle remained confined to a small area, it reflected a truly revolutionary spirit. It started from a modest issue of resistance to a form of agrarian exploitation of *vethi* or forced labour. But later it adopted a radical programme of seizure of surplus land of the landlords and its distribution among the poor peasants and also assumed the proportion of a national liberation struggle against the *Nizamshahi* in Hyderabad.

The intensity and the radical spirit of the Telengana struggle could not be replicated in other parts of the country. Yet, agrarian outbursts on an extensive scale spurred by sensitive issues like sharecropping in central parts of Bengal coincided with the Telengana struggle. The demand for the disposition of the total agrarian products at a rate of 2:1 (*tebhaga*) between the sharecropper and the landlord instead of the existing system of the farmer sharing half and even less of the crops assumed the form of a general agrarian movement in 1946-47. It spread over a large part of north, east and south Bengal including Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Jessore, 24 Parganas and Midnapore. As per the target, the success of the movement was limited. Also this movement brought into surface some of the glaring weaknesses of the party at the peasant front. Muhammad Abdullah Rasul in writing the history of Krishak Sabha admitted that the thousands of volunteers recruited from 1943-44 could not be properly engaged into organizational activities and were dispersed. This lack of cohesion became fatal for the movement which, despite its intensity and the sacrificing spirit of the participants, could not stand for long before the organized attack by the state.¹⁴ However, the movement had a lasting impact on

¹⁴ Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishaksabhar Itihas* (History of Krishaksabha), Kolkata, 1990

the agrarian relations of the Communist Party. The issue of cropsharing that exposed the antagonism of the interests of the landlords and the primary producers brought the peasants into the vortex of class struggle. Besides, the *tebhaga* movement was a social unifier. The unity of interests on economic issues led the peasants to fight together in disregard of their religious identity. When the national life was shaken by communal tension, the areas which came under the spell of the *tebhaga* movement provided a platform of united social resistance against a network of exploitation. Thus, though this agrarian movement did not call for the capture of political power, it initiated the peasants into the politics of class and cultivated an enduring support base of the CPI in countryside.¹⁵

The agrarian outbursts were paralleled by similar disorders in the tea gardens of North Bengal. Strikes, demonstrations, violent clashes with authority and all sorts of agitations invoked and led by the Communist Party not only posed a threat to the authorities of the tea gardens but created a general problem of law and order in the localities. The extract of a letter written on 21.02.47 by the Manager, Matelli Tea Estate, Jalpaiguri, to Messers Jardine Skinner & Co was quite revealing of the gravity of the situation:

“Communism has become rampant. Law and order has become so seriously undermined as to be almost non-existent. Weekly communist meetings at Māl have increased to almost daily affairs and labour is quite out of hand abandoning their work to attend these meetings. The communist speakers make false statements of the most dangerous character and calculated to inflame the illiterate *coolie* (labourers) into violence.

¹⁵ Cooper Adriene: *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengal 1930-1950*, Kolkata, 1988 & Sen Sunil. *Peasant Movements in India*, Kolkata, 1982

...Our immediate need is sufficient armed force to restore law and order and to restore the authority of the Managers and so allow them to adopt a strong but fair attitude.”¹⁶

True to the ideal of a broad-based mass movement, the Communist Party did not confine itself to the issues of agrarian and industrial fronts. It launched actions on issues like the trial of the INA prisoners, the mutiny of the Royal Indian naval forces, which cut across class barriers but which due to their nationalist content had a wider public concern.

Posing Threat

Thus in 1945-46 when negotiations for the transfer of power from the British Raj to a nationalist government by consensus had been going on, the Communist Party appeared as a serious threat with its double-edged weapon of anti-imperialist struggle and unmasking the indigenous collaborators to imperialists. The confidential reports and interviews made at the Government level constantly referred to the communist danger. A series of letters exchanged between Field Marshall Viscount Wavell and Lord Pethick-Lawrence identified the communists along with the Congress left wing as the main enemy to the British Government and the mainstream Congress Party. Wavell wrote to Pethick-Lawrence on August 13, 1946:

“It may of course be that an Interim Government will be able to control labour more effectively, but only if they are prepared to take a firm line with the agitation of the Communists and the Congress Left Wing.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Home Political Department Records, File No: 130/47, Sub: Alleged Rioting and Looting by the Communists in the Jalpaiguri District

¹⁷ Document No: 146

The Transfer of Power Documents (1942-1947), Vol.-VIII: Interim Government, July 3-November 1, 1946: ed. by Nicholas Mansergh (Her Majesty's Stationary Office)

In another letter dated February 3, 1947 Wavell referred to a note by the Joint Planning Committee:

"In the provinces the administration continues to run down.... Communists and Left Wing Congressmen are allowed to carry on revolutionary and subversive propaganda. Labour is very restless, largely because of communist influence, and strikes in essential industries threaten the whole economy of the country. All such unrest is fomented and exploited for political ends."¹⁸

A similar tone can be found in Pethick-Lawrence's letter to Wavell on March 14, 1947:

"There have been of late a disquieting number of indications of the subversive activities of the communists in India. First, and perhaps most important is Burrows' letter...containing a report of the paying over to the CPI funds of half a *lakh* of rupees by the Russian representative on the World Youth Delegation at present visiting India. There have also been references in recent letters to Communist activities amongst aboriginal both in Bengal and Bombay."¹⁹

The manner in which the possibility of the communist take-over was apprehended is proved by another letter. It was written by Mr Fourie, a senior official of the South African Dept of External Affairs, who had served in the South African Delegation in the first meeting of the U.N. General Assembly in London in 1946 to Mr Beards, the Private Secretary to Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister of Britain, on February 16, 1947. He wrote:

"...whether in the last resort it is not the wider course to have the Muslims than the Hindus as Britain's friends. Muslim friendship would make it less difficult to prevent India from becoming an easy prey to

¹⁸ Document No: 337

The Transfer of Power Documents (1942-1947), Vol.-IX: The Fixing of a Time Limit, November 4-March 22, 1947

¹⁹ Ibid Document No: 533

communist ideology and Soviet influence. Strategical and ideological as well as Imperial considerations point to the Muslims as the better choice if a choice is forced on Britain by the course of events.”²⁰

This contemplation of political alliance with the Muslim communalists as a weapon to fight the communist ideology is a clue to understanding the British response to the separatist demand of the Muslim League. The fear psychosis of the British Government also affected those Indian communities whom the communists identified as class enemies. The Nawab of Bhopal made an appeal to Rear Admiral Viscount Mountbatten who by that time had been posted in Burma and subsequently assumed the Viceroyalty of India:

“In any country in the world the two democratic barriers against the rising tide of communism are the vested interests which in India are the *jagirdars* (a corp of officers enjoying land in lieu of salary) and *zamindars* and the money owners which in India are the big industrialists. The Congress are at present busily engaged in liquidating the *Zamindars* and *Jagirdars* as these unfortunates have already fallen into their clutches. The future intention of the Congress is to mete out similar treatment to the Princes. I tell you straight that unless you and His Majesty’s Government support the States and prevent them from disappearing from the Indian political map, you will very shortly have an India dominated by Communists. You may laugh at this prophecy and reply by saying that the Communist Party in India is a small one, but I do draw your attention to the fact that the Dockers’ Unions, the Railwaymen’s Federation and the Post and Telegraph sub-ordinates Unions are all dominated by Communists. Despite, therefore, their smallness in numbers the Communists are in a position, by their control over the transportation and communication, to paralyse and starve India into a State of anarchy and chaos.”²¹

²⁰ Ibid. Document No: 409

²¹ Document No: 201

The Transfer of Power Documents (1942-1947), Vol.-XII: The Mountbatten Viceroyalty Princes, partition and Independence, July 8-August 15, 1947

The implication of the letter was clear. The social trio of the capitalists, feudal elements and the imperialists should be woven into a common political front to combat communism as a political threat. On the other hand, it was against this 'evil nexus' of the imperialists and its different shades of indigenous collaborators that the class struggle of the communists had been launched. In other words, the political challenge of communism was presented and perceived in the context of the sharpening class conflicts. Hence it was fearsome. It could harness economic contradictions to fuel a political revolution and by capturing political power it could turn the existing pattern of society and economy upside down.

Negotiating with Nationalism

The radical face of communism as an ideology of class struggle and revolution was paralleled by the constitutional image of the party participating in the electoral process. Once again, following the guideline of the seventh Congress of the Comintern the Communist Party began to utilize the constitutional avenues of politics. The electoral performance of the Communist Party was, however, not very impressive at this stage.²² In the Provincial Elections of 1946 the communists won only a handful of seats – three in Bengal, two in Bombay and two in Madras. The situation was most despairing in labour sector. Apart from the tea garden workers and the railway trade unionists, who supported the communist candidates, in the other labour sectors in Calcutta, Howrah, Hooghly, Barrackpore and Asansol the party suffered a crushing defeat.

²² *The Statesman*, March 1946

The electoral misfortune of the communists in the labour seats, despite their inspiring leadership to the labouring masses deserves a careful analysis. The communists alleged that the Congress resorted to hooliganism and false voting. This, however, could not fully explain the debacle. A party activist who had a long association with the workers in the mines and other industrial workers in Asansol, narrated his experience:

“We have an experience of trade unionism ever since 1948-49. Our organizational activities spread over mines and factories, towns and villages. We noted a peculiar tendency, especially among the non-Bengali labourers. As unionists they upheld the Red Flag but as nationalists they fancied for the tricolour one. They had a confidence in the Red Party as an agency to protect their rights and, therefore, could even sacrifice their lives to hold its banner high. But during election, when they lined up to cast their votes, they could not even recognize us.”²³

This statement is suggestive of the popular perception of communism as an ideology of class struggle. Yet, the failure of the Communist Party to identify with the nationalist tradition of the country remained a major weakness of the party in the decades preceding independence.

A resolution of the Central Committee of the CPI in April 1946 admitted that, even though the Congress and the League were pursuing policies of compromise with imperialism and thus in essence were betraying the anti-imperialist struggle, they still enjoyed considerable popular support. The resolution mentioned that:

“The leaders are able to do this because they still have immense influence as the traditional leaders of their respective organizations. This is

²³ Ray Haradhan. *Agnigarbha Dinguli* (The Fiery Days), Kolkata, 2002, p. 120
Haradhan Ray was initiated into communism in the 1940s and joined the A.I.T.U.C. in the 1950s. He played a major role in organizing the trade union movement particularly in the mining region of Bardhaman. He was elected in the State Assembly six times and thrice in the Parliament.

today a big obstacle to the growth of revolutionary forces, which can only be overcome by patiently disillusioning the masses about the policy of their leaderships.”²⁴

The statement, in other words, was a confession of the incomplete mass mobilization by the party. Unmasking the bourgeois leadership had been targeted by the party ever since its formation. Even during the age of the united front when the communists made a diplomatic alliance with the bourgeoisie, the Communist Party never stopped in exposing the class character of the Indian state. The bourgeoisie and the feudal lords, whom the communists identified as the main enemies of the people, were also aware of the real nature of the communist danger. The political enmity of the communists was rightly assessed in terms of their class identity. But to the industrial and agrarian proletariat with whom the Communist Party tried to identify itself the message of the party was not yet fully convincing. They oscillated between the proletariat and the nationalist identities. In the former status they looked to the communists as their natural leaders. But in the latter position they still trusted the bourgeois leadership. The struggle of Telengana, however inspiring, was still an isolated phenomenon. The communist leaders could present it as a model before the proletariat. But this example could not be repeated in other parts of the country where the situation and consciousness of the people was not fit for such an action. Even in Telengana the conspicuous indifference of the workers to the peasants' cause frustrated the communist idea of collective resistance of the exploited classes.

²⁴ For the Final Assault

– Tasks of the Indian People in the Present Phase of Indian Revolution, Political Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India, August 1946 *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-V (1944-1948), p 105

Here the experience of the Indian communists strikingly differed from that of their Chinese counterpart. During the period between the First and the Second World Wars China was exposed to the Japanese onslaught. In those invasions the Japanese army faced the strongest resistance not from the military force of the Chinese Government but from the peasant militia. This militant group in China's countryside was mobilized and led mainly by the Chinese Communist Party. The researchers in Chinese history found an intimate link between this wartime popularity of the Communist Party and its post-war triumph. During the war the Communist Party got a chance of recruiting a huge mass of followers whom it could use subsequently in its bid for socialism. The soldiers of nationalist warfare were transformed into the cadres of class struggle. The Communist Party by the successful leadership in the nationalist struggle appeared to be the natural leader of the struggling masses fighting against an anti-people government. The communist rise to power in China, therefore, should be understood 'as a species of nationalist movement'.

In the same way, in countries like Yugoslavia, Vietnam or Cuba, where communism triumphed not under the Soviet tutelage but through popular revolution, the communists identified themselves with the nationalist image. During wars against foreign foes the communists championed the cause of national liberation. In post-war years communism survived as a symbol of national resistance against the Japanese aggression. The communist ideology seemed to be most effective in serving the purposes of the nation-state committed to the ideology of free citizenship.²⁵

²⁵ Johnson Chalmers A.: *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power – The Emergence of Revolutionary China*, Stanford, California, 1962

Unfortunately the Indian communists failed to evolve a nationalist identity. During the Second World War they tried to infuse the spirit of People's War among the Indian masses. But the 'People's War' did not become harmonious with the war for national liberation. Rather to make the People's War successful the communists dissociated themselves from the nationalist struggle and even seemed to have betrayed the cause of nationalism. The result was that the popular loyalty to the communists too became partial. The communists were the natural leaders in class struggle. But they could not become the leaders of the nation. In the post-independence period the major task for the Communist Party, therefore, was to resolve the duality of actions of the proletariat. That the battle for emancipation from economic exploitation and liberation from political oppression should be fought on a common front and against a common enemy would be the party's teaching to the people. The lesson was essential not only for the success of class struggle but also for the empowerment of the Communist Party.

Chapter - II

From Revolution to Election (1947-1952)

Liberation or Hoax: Communism and the Nation-State

The achievement of independence posed new challenges to the Communist Party. The Congress which had been the driving force in the struggle for independence now established the nationalist government in post-colonial period. The class leanings of the Congress Party was the communists' main target of attack. The battle against imperialism terminating, the idea of forming temporary alliances between the communists and the native capitalists also lost its relevance. In the changed context the liquidation of the class enemies within the society was to be eventually the immediate objective for the Communist Party. But any attempt to defame the Congress and the social classes which sustained it ran the risk of being branded as anti-national. Consequently, the problem of fitting the ideology of class struggle into the politics of a time dominated by the euphoria of independence was a serious problem. This dilemma had its origin in the colonial period and it became more acute in post-colonial days.

The communists, however, sustained their anti-establishment attitude by denouncing independence as merely a political victory with little freedom from the economic enslavement by the imperialists and their native agents. The colonial administration was dismantled, yet, the Indian capitalists who seemed to have acted as the native agents of foreign imperialism still held control over India's political and economic life through a close link with the earlier colonial masters. The continuation of this network of capitalist exploitation made the achievement of political independence incomplete and meaningless.

The communists also debunked partition. If independence was incomplete the partition too, according to them, was artificial. Being great protagonists of the principle of national self-determination, they did not entirely disapprove of the idea of dividing a national territory if it would satisfy the urge for self-determination of a particular community. But to the communists, self-determination was not just a principle to determine the right of separation of a national unit. It was also a great unifying principle which guaranteed real freedom and democracy to each nationality in independent India.

Following this logic the demand of the Muslim League to form a separate Muslim state appeared to be thoroughly undemocratic. The communists pointed out that the formation of a separate state on the basis of religion would do no good to the common Muslims. Without complete independence from the yoke of foreign imperialists and their native agents neither freedom nor democracy could be won for the common masses. Hence the communists appealed to the Muslim League to join a common struggle for genuine independence. If partition was to be made at all it should be decided by the democratic vote of the people without the intervention of a foreign power. So, though partition based on self-determination was not unjustifiable to them, their intention was to prove that by applying the principle of self-determination it would create a political structure where this kind of vivisection would not be required. It spoke of a system in which peoples of culturally and linguistically homogenous units would be free to shape their own destiny but where they would act in voluntary union for fighting a common struggle against imperialist-feudal regime.

On this ground of artificiality of division the party up till the Second Party Congress in 1948 did not let its own organization to be divided on national basis in Pakistan and India. Thus in contrast to the communal demand of the Muslim League and the nationalist aspiration of the Congress the Communist Party upheld a new principle of state building. It assured national unity with a promise of fulfilment of democratic ambitions of each community in a plural society.¹

But the ideal of self-determination and regional autonomy, however democratic in essence, sent wrong signals. E. M. S. Namboodiripad in his assessment of the role of the Communist Party in India's freedom struggle confessed about the gross misunderstanding of the communist thinking-about partition:

“This, however, does not mean that the approach of the Communist Party towards Pakistan was free from errors. For one thing, the Communists had been campaigning in those days in such a situation as would have helped, at least indirectly, the argument of Jinnah that the Hindus and Muslims were two nations. The Party did not endeavour to expose sufficiently forcefully and uncompromisingly the League stand that borders between the two countries should be determined on the basis of religion. This enabled the opponents of the Party to make propaganda that it helped the demand of the League for Pakistan and the subsequent partition of India. The impression

¹ i) For the Final Assault

– Political Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India, August, 1946

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-V

ii) Sen Ranen. *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha (1948-1964)*, Kolkata, 1992

spread even among the friends of the Party that Pakistan was the manifest form of the Leninist theory of nationalities.”²

Partition was, however, endorsed later. But the bleak assessment of independence was not revised. International peers like the Soviet Communist Party, Mao-tse-Tung in China and the Communist Party of Great Britain inspired the non-conformist attitude of the Indian communists.³

Their thesis argued that the process of decolonization after the Second World War did not bring about any fundamental change in the former European colonies. The foreign imperialists left their native agents among the bourgeois capitalists and the self-seeking bureaucrats. The thesis envisioned the creation of a people's front through a combination of the Communist Party with the other leftist forces as well as the progressive section of the bourgeoisie to destroy this evil nexus. Actually in international politics the removal of the Fascist threat nullified the justification of Grand Alliance by the middle of the '40s. Rather the conflict among the allied parties was intensified. The People's War paved the way for the Cold War with the

² Namboodiripad E.M.S: *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, p. 470

³ The books and articles which were referred to the party ranks as clue to the correct understanding of the international situation, were

Kardej: *Problems of International Development*

Zhdanov: *International Situation-information document*

Varga: *Plans of Anglo-American Domination*

Zhukov: *Colonial Problem*-published in the *Communist*

Zhukov: *Indian Situation-information document, Self-criticism of the French Communist Party*

Harry Pollitt: *Report to the C C. of the CPGB*

-the names of those writings are taken from *On the Present Policy and Tasks of the Communist Party of India*, January 1948

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-V

sharpening of divide between the capitalist and the socialist camps. The new situation had its reflection in Asian countries, particularly in the newly liberated colonies. The expediency of anti-colonial struggle having been over, the contradictions of class interests between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat came to the surface. In such a situation the idea of a popular front vis-à-vis the bourgeois establishment became a readily acceptable proposition to the Indian communists.

A Leap Forward to Radicalism

The result was an ideological divide in the party's policy and organization. P. C. Joshi who had been the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of India had to go in 1948. The man who replaced him was B. T. Ranadive, a man with a radical leaning.

This new leadership identified some serious errors in the older party line. In a report on the reformist deviation, Ranadive pointed out that the party was a victim of revisionism throughout the early 1940s. It was hopelessly slow in recognizing the changed character of the Second World War after the involvement of the Soviet Union and in consequence, betrayed the cause of international fraternity of the working class. Finally it realized the transformation of the war into the people's war and suspended hostilities towards Britain which was the Soviet ally. Even then the party could not play its proper role. Rather, Ranadive criticized that having separated themselves from the 9th August struggle the communists more and more pushed into taking a non-struggle, non-class approach on every vital question because of the basic defect in the party line. For instance, by 1943, the party failed to take a bold decision by endorsing the right to strike. Similarly, the main slogans of the agrarian front such as the abolition of landlordism, reduction of rent, prohibition of the forced collection of war levy gradually began

to disappear from the scene and reformist programme like 'grow more food' campaign was upheld. It was also due to the faulty understanding of imperialism, according to Ranadive, that the party came up with a horrible formulation about the Socialist Party, the Forward Bloc and other left groups. They were denounced as the fifth columnists, while in reality imperialism was doing the work of the fifth column.

Ranadive attacked the passivity of the party with the argument that it suffered from the rosy illusion of an automatic liberation of all the peoples including the Indians immediately after the defeat of fascism in the war. Even after the illusion was shattered, the party failed to give a proper call of action against the Indian capitalists and the nationalist leaders who trailed behind them. Rather it adhered to a compromising principle that an Indian should not fight an Indian but all Indians should fight together against British imperialism.⁴

Ranadive found the roots of reformism in the confusion between strategy and tactics. Referring to the Leninist formulations he argued that the strategy was based on the understanding of the class relationship of a period as a whole and was chalked out for a given stage of the revolution. Therefore, it could not be changed without proving the falsity or anachronism of this understanding. Tactics, on the other hand, were the lines of action of the proletariat to achieve the objectives within the given period and they might change several times depending on the flow and ebb, the rise and fall of the revolution. The strategy of the Indian communists, according to Ranadive, was to fight for the destruction of the bourgeoisie-imperialist-

⁴ Report on Reformist Deviation

Presented by B. T. Ranadive in the second Congress of the Communist Party of India held in Calcutta from February 28 to March 6

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-V

feudal nexus, wiping out of the survivals of medievalism and going to the transitional economy through nationalization. To achieve this revolutionary objective the initiative had to lie with the industrial workers, peasants and the oppressed section of the petty bourgeoisie in towns. During the Second World War the Indian communists in the name of suspending hostilities towards the British, the Soviet war ally, actually lost this main strategic guideline.⁵

With this strategic guideline the tactics of struggle of the post-war and post-independence period was formulated. The new radical leadership read the prospect of an immediate revolution in the Indian situation in the context of the post-war crisis that disrupted the colonial order. But at the same time this new leadership apprehended a counter-revolutionary conspiracy of the bourgeois establishment in power. It pointed out that by exploiting the old loyalties and the memories of the anti-imperialist struggle these bourgeois organizations would manipulate the masses to keep them away from the social and economic emancipation. Hence the united front of the late '30s and the early '40s on the basis of tactical alliance with the bourgeoisie was abandoned and branded as deviation from the revolutionary ideal. Instead, a democratic front with combination of left groups and classes of proletarian identity was upheld. This would be a collective effort. Ranadive reiterated the Leninist warning that the victory of a revolution could not be achieved through the vanguard section alone. But, though broad-based, ideologically this popular front would be a close-knit formulation. In other words, in selecting the partners of the revolutionary alliance the communists had to be cautious so

⁵ Strategy and Tactics in the struggle for People's Democratic Revolution in India: Adopted by the Politburo in December 1948
Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol. V

that any group, lacking in proper revolutionary spirit and potentiality, could not intervene and betray the revolutionary aspirations of the masses.

The Communist Party, therefore, was instructed to form its own organizations among the sections of population which it identified as the partners in class struggle. Apart from the industrial workers who should be the vanguard in the militant class struggle, in agrarian sector the party was expected to rely on the agrarian labourers, sharecroppers and small peasants. The rich peasants due to their capitalist ambition were decided to be kept outside the class alliance. The party was also instructed to extend its organizational base among the students and youth of all sections, women and the oppressed minorities. The party issued directives to its ranks for organizing unions in each of these fronts at provincial and district levels on the basis of election.⁶

Attempts were also made to infiltrate into the ranks of the Indian army. The contemporary police reports made several references to the communist connections of the Indian army men. One such Report said:

“The Communists hold that there is no chance of achieving any success in an armed insurrection so long as the armed forces of the Country remain loyal to the Government. They will, therefore, not spare any pains to subvert the loyalty of the lower rank personnel of the Armed Forces.

After the failure of the Communists to bring about the railway strike on March 9, 1949 and to advance their cause of a proletarian revolution by indulging in violent activities, a circular was issued by the Communist Party to all provincial units laying special stress on the need to win over the armed

⁶ A Circular-Fraction o Bureau samparkey P.O C.-r (Provincial Organizational Committee) Prastab

(The Proposal of the P.O.C. Regarding Fraction and Bureau)
Collected from S.B. Records-CPI Trade Union Activities

forces. It was given out that there was no chance of an armed insurrection succeeding in the country if the armed forces remained loyal to the Government. The circular conceded that up till then the Communists had not been able to win over any large sections of the armed forces and therefore asked all units to give special attention to the formation of calls in the services and extending their influence amongst the army personnel.

Leaflets issued by the Communist Party addressed to members of the Defence Services have been found in wide circulation in West Bengal, Hyderabad, Madras and Punjab. These documents usually explained to the other ranks that the latter belonged to the proletariat and were low-paid and were being exploited by the capitalist Government, which existed only for the benefit of the richer classes and therefore should refuse to carry out the orders of their officers, who also belonged to the bourgeois class and should not open fire or take any repressive action against the peasants and labourers who belonged to the same class from which the members of the lower ranks of the Defence Services came. The O.Rs were also encouraged not only to disobey the orders of their officers but to turn their rifles against them.”⁷

The communists who were imprisoned also began to use the jails as platforms to propagate the communist ideas among the prisoners on non-political charges. A police report shows the anxiety of the government at such tendency:

“I was not very happy with what I saw in my last visit to the Presidency Jail. All the Security prisoners numbering about 150 or so have been kept together and yet they vary very greatly as to the degree of complicity in subversive activities. I personally think that those who are known to be deeply involved in subversive conspiracy should be kept in some outside jail or camp. If that is done, I think the major trouble will be over.

At the present moment they have really a communist propaganda centre in the Presidency jail where they feed those who are on the outskirts of the movement on their pernicious theories. Among those whom they teach are

⁷ A Report from the I.B. (Ministry of Home Affairs), Government of India-1950 I.B. Records – Subject: Societies-Communist Party of India-File No: 35/26 (M.F.)

ordinary labourers and men and women who have probably taken some part in organising strikes, etc.”⁸

The cultural organizations of the party like the Progressive Writers’ and Artists’ Association, Indian Public Theatre Association became engaged in ideological indoctrination through artistic performances. On the one hand, the Artiste Association which had developed in the early ’40s, like the trade unions in industry, to protect the interests of the professional activists of different cultural organizations was largely activated. On the other hand, singers and music composers, actors and playwrights, poets and writers with leftist leanings like Salil Chaudhuri, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Arun Chaudhuri, Sajal Roycahaudhuri, Suchitra Mukhopadhyay, Samar Sen, Gopal Halder, Benoy Roy took different forms of art to the people in both urban and rural areas. Not all the members of these cultural organizations belonged to the Communist Party but most of them were close sympathizers of the communists and very often accompanied the trade unions and the Kisan Sabha to carry on cultural activities during the public meetings of those unions. These performances were not only entertaining but also had an ideological mission and built up an intellectual basis of revolutionary politics in the state.⁹ The communists also tried to harness the other left groups like the Socialist Party, the Forward Bloc and form a democratic front with them to launch joint action against the bourgeois government.

⁸ Letter written to the Secretary, Home (Police) Department by the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta on April 19, 1949:

Records of Home (Poll) Dept-Sub: Transfer of Some Communist Security Prisoners to Jail (Detention Camp of Buxa) in Jalpaiguri District: File No: Misc/49

⁹ Roy Anuradha: *Sekaler Marxiya Sanskriti Andolan*, (Marxist Cultural Movement of Those Days) Kolkata, 2000 & Pradhan Sudhi: *Marxist Cultural Movement in India – Chronicles and Documents, 1936-1947*, Kolkata, 1979

The Communist Party subsequently let loose a series of insurrectionary activities against the anti-people government at both urban and rural fronts. All sorts of violent and non-violent protests ranging from mass demonstrations to attack on the symbols of government authority became rampant. In rural areas the Communist Party had already created a social base through popular mobilization on *tebhaga* issue. Through the *tebhaga* movement the party wanted to ensure for the actual producers the just share in the products of their toil. Now it brought more radical issues like land to the tillers, stoppage of evictions, destruction of hoarding into focus. A police report shows the extent of disturbances created in the process:

“The Communist Party of India despite the ban on it, embarked on a dangerous programme of violence in the form of loot, arson, murder, attacks on policemen, police posts, jails, Congressmen, *jotedars* (big landowners) and Government supporters and frequent defiance of Sec 144. The party members exerted themselves to develop the highest tempo of such activities in certain inaccessible areas particularly in Kakdwip area in 24 Parganas, Domjur and Jagatballavpur areas in Howrah, Bora Kamalapur and Chanditala areas in Hooghly, Jaypur and Vishnupur areas in Bankura, Agradwip and Raina areas in Burdwan; in Tamluk, Ghatal and Sar Subdivisions in Midnapore district. The Students Federation, Friends of the Soviet Union, Civil Liberties Union, Peoples Relief Committee, *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti*, BPKS, All India Peace Congress, etc, were utilized as the agencies for spreading communist ideology.”¹⁰

Due to extensive precautionary measures and vigorous police actions the widely advertised All India Railway Strike engineered by the CPI, however, became a dismal failure.

¹⁰ Annual Police Report-1949, I.B. Records

The 'Red' Challenge and the 'White' Response

The Government was tough in handling the communist threat. By quoting a Government official an English daily – *Hindustan Standard* wrote:

“Government, he averred, is fully convinced that the communist objective is the capture of political power by using violent means and methods but the Government is determined to take ruthless measures to save the country from chaos and to avoid repetition of China, Burma and Malaysia in India.”¹¹

The police repression created a scene of ‘white terror’. The most serious of these clashes took place in 1949, when the police firing on an unarmed demonstration of women in the street of Calcutta killed four ladies including the first female member of the Communist Party of Bengal – Latika Sen. The situation worsened to such an extent that the Communist Party was banned from 1948 to 1951. The Government took a series of repressive measures including the passing of the notorious West Bengal Security Amendment Act (1948). Though theoretically the Act could be applied to anyone, who endangered the security of the public and the state, it was specially meant for the communists.¹²

The communist menace was, however, more encompassing and penetrating than what could be met by repression alone. The ideological content of the communist challenge and the necessity to combat it with a more tactically powerful weapon than military power was being emphasized from various quarters. Asoka Mehta, the famous Socialist leader, made his comment in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* – a newspaper with an

¹¹ *Hindustan Standard* (November 14, 1948)

¹² Sen Ranen: *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha (1948-1964)* & Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Pratham Khanda)*, Kolkata, 1986

avowedly anti-communist colour. The newspaper introduced this article as “a brilliant analysis of the extent and loci of the Communist power in the country”. The article mentioned:

“The Strength of the communists is not in their programme it is in the advantages that flow from intimate association with Russia and the well-organized appeal it has for deracinated intelligentsia, for men and women in search of a new tabernacle.”

In this analysis the credit was given to a solid and regular source of patronage from a foreign agency for the consolidation of the communist forces in India. It, however, recognized the fact that the Communist Party had already created an organizational base in India and had also made an impression upon the imagination of the people of different categories by a novel alternative. The author of the article, therefore, suggested as remedial measures:

“The Communist threat cannot end by repression. Its counter measures are partly psychological, partly organizational. And that demands thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of communism. Only an alert people, vigilant of their rights and liberties, can make light of the menace that the communists are to-day.”¹³

While Ashok Mehta was reflecting on the possibility of containing the growing ascendancy of the communists among the poor and the marginal communities, there were many other periodicals which showed an overt sympathy for them. *Krishak* which had left-wing links mentioned:

“The methods which the Government of West Bengal is following to suppress the communists appear anti-democratic to the eyes of the people of independent India. The Government should be aware of the fact that the people are being aggrieved because of the swelling economic crisis and deprivation all over the country. It is also undeniable that the communists are channeling this popular discontent to the anti-government direction. So, while the Government was disparaging the communist activities as anti-

¹³ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (April 18, 1948)

state, the anti-communist action of the Government too should follow a democratic rule. This democratic remedy would be to make immediate and earnest effort to mitigate the sufferings of the people.”¹⁴

Against this background of popular criticism of the Government’s cruelty to a people’s party, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was continually warning the governments in the provinces about the unhappy consequence of any uncalculated step against the communists. Nehru cited the Congress policy in West Bengal towards the communists as a miscalculated venture and even disapproved of the ban on the Communist Party. He felt that instead of weakening the party it would rather tighten its psychological grip over the people. In a series of letters to the Chief Ministers he was asking for a tactical approach towards the communist question. Some of his letters are the following:

a) “It was the primary duty of governments to maintain law and order and to meet any challenge made to it. As the Communist Party of India has made that challenge, it had to be effectively met. Two points were, however, stressed. One was that we should try to keep apart the violence and sabotage part of the Communist Party’s programme in India from their normal ideological approach. That is to say our action against the Communist Party members is because they indulge in violence and sabotage and openly say so in their circulars, etc., and not because they hold certain opinions. It is important that this difference be made, as otherwise, some people might be misled into thinking that we are attacking a way of thinking and not violent activities against the State.” (14 May 1949)

b) “We discuss communism and have to take steps against the violent and subversive activities of the Communist Party in India. That is natural and inevitable. Yet the real problem is something bigger than communism – it is what lies behind communism, it is an economic distemper coming at a

¹⁴ *Krishak* (28.01.48)

time when expectations have been roused and some kind of political consciousness has come into existence among vast masses of the people.” (4 June 1949)¹⁵

So, Nehru was recommending a twofold weapon. On the one hand, he appreciated the necessity of rectifying the economic maladies which created the material basis for the rise of communism. On the other hand, his suggestion was that before launching police action to control the subversive activities of the communists it was necessary to make them appear to the people as subversive elements. Just as the communists invoked popular militancy against the anti-people government similarly the state would legitimize its repressive mechanism in the name of ensuring peace and security to the people. In other words, the state would raise a weapon to ideologically disarm the communists.

Ideology: A Jigsaw Puzzle

While the Government kept both the ideological and militaristic weapons open to combat communism, the communist movement suffered a jolt from within. Andhra Provincial Committee from the beginning presented a strong point of opposition to Ranadive's programme. It relied upon the Telengana model of agrarian radicalism which Ranadive discarded as heroic but sectarian. In West Bengal the central leadership was obeyed. But the verdict was not accepted without questioning. The arrogant and authoritarian attitude of the new leadership and of those who represented it at the provincial level caused a sense of alienation of a group of devoted party cadres. Now the dismal failure of the party to invoke popular response

¹⁵ Nehru Jawaharlal: *Letters to Chief Ministers* (Government of India, New Delhi, 1985)

on occasions like the railway strike on March 9, 1949 led to serious questioning about the justification of adventurism.¹⁶ The strike failed not because of the massive precaution taken by the Government but because the people refused to obey the verdict of the party. It was increasingly becoming clear that the casual acts of violence without revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary programme could neither popularize the party nor integrate its members. Ranen Sen, a leading figure of the Communist Party in West Bengal, considered this line as one of disastrous effect on both the popularity and the organization of the party:

“The dangerous document which he (Ranadive) had produced in the party congress claiming the imminence of revolution was followed by his formulation of even more damaging and injudicious party programmes. The party was entrapped in reckless adventurism. Joshi despite his revisionism consolidated the strength of the party. Ranadive gave a blow to it.”¹⁷

A few haphazardly collected data presented in a later party document clearly reflect how severe was the damage done by this left sectarianism to the party’s people’s front. It showed:

“Party membership has fallen from nearly a hundred thousand to barely 20,000. The damage has been the most serious in the industrial cities and areas where the main strength of the party lay. In Tamil Nadu (in Madras Province) formerly our strongest proletarian base, the party membership is estimated to have gone down from 5000 to 200. In Bombay, the GKU (textile workers’ union) is today controlled and run by workers who have gone out of the party. In Cawnpore, Sholapur, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Dhulia, Amalner—in fact, in all working class centres, the bulk of party members have either gone out of the party or are inactive.

The trade unions led by the party are in a state of complete paralysis and stagnation.

¹⁶ Sen Ranen. *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha (1948-1964)*

¹⁷ Sen Ranen. *Bharater Communist Partyr Itibritta* (The Stories of The Communist Party of India), Kolkata, 1996, p. 131

...The mass peasant unions which the party led have been practically wiped out, except in certain small areas in Bihar, Bengal, U. P. Except in Telengana, where the peasant movement has reached the level of uprising, the party is not today leading a broad peasant movement anywhere.”¹⁸

While in practical experience Ranadive's programme was found to be a faulty one, the international communist camp too disapproved of his line. *For A Lasting Peace, For A People's Democracy* which was the organ of the Cominform Bureau published an editorial titled as '*Mighty Advance of the National Liberation Movement in the Colonial and the Dependent Countries*', dated January 27, 1950. The article found in Ranadive's policy the reflection of Trotskyite-Titoite dogmatism and adventurous methods that could lead the party only to disruption. The article approved of the party's stand on Indian independence. It agreed:

“A sham independence was bestowed on India. But the interests of British imperialism remain “Sacred and inviolable”. The Mountbattens have departed but British imperialism remains, and Octopus-like grips India in its bloody tentacles.”

But the prescribed way to get out of this misfortune did not tally with the programme Ranadive had formulated. The article recommended the following:

“In these conditions the task of the Indian Communists, drawing on the experience of national liberation movement in China and other countries, is, naturally, to strengthen the alliance of the working class with all the peasantry, to fight for the introduction of the urgently needed agrarian reform and on the basis of the common struggle for freedom and national

¹⁸ A Note on the Present Situation in Our Country prepared by Ajoy Ghosh, S. A Dange and S. V. Ghate and circulated on 30. 9. 1950
Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VI, pp. 401-402

independence of their country, against the Anglo-American imperialists oppressing it and against the reactionary big bourgeoisie and feudal princes collaborating with them to unite all classes, parties, groups and organisations willing to defend the national independence and freedom of India.”¹⁹

In other words, instead of relying only on the natural allies the proletariat was persuaded to form a broad based class alliance. In practice it meant allying with the rich peasants and the nationalist bourgeoisie, who because of their capitalist ambition had been identified as class enemies in Ranadive’s thesis.

Manikuntala Sen, a prominent activist of the party, then in Jail, received this international directive at utter dismay:

“Once again we got confused about the party line. One day I came across in a daily newspaper a quotation from the *For the Lasting Peace and People’s Democracy*. *The Lasting Peace* was published from Bukharest. It was considered as the mouthpiece of the international party line. The article suggested that in India the democratic movement should include the nationalist bourgeois party, working class as well as both the rich and the poor sections of the peasantry. ... What a great shock! We were supposed to be engaged in a class struggle. Our class allies were the workers, middle class, peasants and agricultural labourers. The rest fell into the category of class enemies. But now if a reversal would have to be made by selecting the partners of struggle from the classes mentioned in the paper, how can we justify our previous actions? The slogan of ‘sham independence’ that brought us into prison suddenly lost its significance. Within some days I received the original document. It became obvious that the party would have to face a serious dissension on the issue.”²⁰

Manikuntala Sen’s reaction represented the general psychology of the party ranks that had plunged the party into severe ideological crisis. The result was that Ranadive was

¹⁹ Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VI (1949-1951), pp. 90-91

²⁰ Sen Manikuntala: *Sediner Katha* (The Story of Those Days), Kolkata, 1982, pp. 212-213

expelled from the party and made the same unceremonious departure as his predecessor – P. C. Joshi – had made two years ago. The Central Committee was reconstituted in 1950 with Rajeshwar Rao from Andhra Committee as its new General Secretary.²¹

On June 1, 1950 the new Central Committee issued a letter notifying the changes in party line that amounted to the rejection of the programmatic understanding given in the Second Congress and subsequently elaborated in a way called the 'Tactical Line'; rejection of the thesis of Single-State Revolution, i.e., the theory of the interweaving of the Democratic and Socialist stages of the Indian Revolution; rejection of the idea that the entire bourgeoisie, including the rich peasantry, had been transformed into the enemies of the People's Democratic Revolution.

Rather the new policy pointed out the internal variety of these social classes and assessed their potentiality as allies on the basis of these diversities. According to this assessment, the rich peasantry who carried on feudal exploitations would have to be treated as enemies, though a distinction required to be made between them and the landlords. Those rich peasants who did not carry on feudal exploitation would be allies. The middle peasantry would be the firm ally of the proletariat in the democratic revolution. The big bourgeoisie who in alliance with imperialism dominated the internal market by oppressing and exploiting the regions of other nationalities, which were economically and culturally backward, were the enemies of the front. There were other sections of the bourgeoisie, who were not big by themselves yet were intimately connected with feudal or big bourgeois interests and hence were enemies of the

²¹ Sen Ranen: *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha (1948-1964)*

democratic revolution. The middle bourgeoisie were the non-monopoly sections, which were injured by the imperialist big bourgeoisie cut throat competition and which had little or no link with the feudal forces. Hence they might be progressive to a certain extent. There were some sections which had direct links with big business or interests bound with feudal exploitation. Though these sections of the bourgeoisie of backward provinces showed some dissatisfaction against the imperialists on matters like industrialization, etc. and a tactical use of that dissatisfaction might be made by the communists, this part of the bourgeoisie could not be considered as even temporary allies in the democratic front. Only the rest of the sections of the bourgeoisie, which stood up against the big bourgeoisie on the issues of nationalist interests, could be considered as an ally.

Thus by selecting allies from each of the social classes the Communist Party would build up a powerful united front of the broad masses of the peasantry and the intellectuals, the petty bourgeoisie in the cities and the national bourgeoisie who suffered from vexations and restrictions imposed by imperialism and its lackeys to wage the struggle against imperialism and its native agents. The basis of the front would be the alliance of the workers and the toiling peasantry under the leadership of the working class.

Upholding the nationalist cause and linking up the nationalist struggle with class struggle the new committee criticized the previous politburo for its negative stance on all nationalist movements and nationalist demands. The new committee reminded that the Communist Party should stand and fight for such progressive and democratic demands as equality of all nations and semi-nationalities growing as nations, equal development of their language, culture and economic life, dissolution of feudal states, formation of linguistic-cultural

provinces, self-determination of all nationalities and semi-nationalities to the point of secession, unity of these nations into a voluntary union. It was regretted that taking advantage of the indifference and the inaction of the communists the 'reactionary' elements of the Indian population like the princes, landlords and the monopoly bourgeoisie had so far exploited those democratic movements to serve their reactionary purposes and thus in essence had betrayed popular action. The task of the Communist Party, therefore, would be to convince the people that these demands could be fulfilled only by overthrowing the rule of imperialism and its agents. In this way the communists would seize the initiative and lead these movements as part of the general struggle for national independence and people's democracy.

There was great emphasis in this letter on inner-party democracy. The new Central Committee admitted that neither in the period of reformism nor in the period of sectarianism, the inner-party democracy had been properly established. On the contrary, it had either been crippled or been destroyed completely. The ranks and lower committees had never been associated with the shaping of the party policy. A mechanical division of the political and the practical functions of the party had been made. The right of chalking out the political line and taking important political decisions had been assigned to the Central Committee which reduced itself to the politburo in the days of illegality, and the practical works were left to the "dumb ranks" of the party. Against this error of authoritarianism the new committee promised a democratic structure in which every party member would have the right to participate in inner-party life and contribute to the decision-making process. This reform was vital because the unity of theory and practice was one of the cardinal principles of Marxism. No separation of ideological and practical functions is permissible inside a communist party.

The party upheld the concept of the Chinese path for the Indian revolution, advocating the development of extensive agrarian revolutionary struggles on the pattern of Telengana, whenever conditions permitted.²²

But the inner party struggle was not resolved with the adoption of the new thesis. The limitations of the new thesis were detected in two areas: a) in assessing the exact stage of Indian revolution b) in formulating the path of Indian revolution. A pamphlet which voiced the opposition was published within a few months. It opined that the current leadership merely replaced the older model of Soviet revolution by the Chinese way. But none bothered to understand and analyse the situation in Indian terms. However, the mere adoption of a way, which had become successful in a particular situation, without recreating that situation, could not reproduce its success. According to this note, it was this failure to assess the specification of the Indian situation that led the older politburo to pursue a wrong tactical line, based on gross subjectivism, of substituting wish for fact. The current leadership, despite its critical outlook, carried on the same subjectivism. On the one hand, it overestimated the maturity of the situation and the degree of revolutionary potentialities of the masses and indulged in adventurous actions. On the other, it underestimated the fighting capacity of the masses and ignored the volume of democratic opinion in the country. It sustained a radical attitude that nothing could be achieved till the present government was overthrown and a people's government was established. But this apparently revolutionary outlook in practice led to passive inaction of the

²² Letter of the New Central Committee of the C. P. I. to All Party members and sympathisers

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VI

party on some urgent issues like protection of civil liberties, refugee rehabilitation, high prices, exorbitant charges on the peasantry, evictions, real wage-cut and a few other populist issues.²³

The lack of unanimity and cohesion among the leaders also affected the rank and file of the party. Getting confused at the continually changing and conflicting guidelines the general members and party cadres began to raise questions about the party's decisions and even showed open disloyalty to the leadership. Nandalal Bose, a local party functionary, representing the views of a strong section of the rank and file, issued a document in the fictitious name *Sadananda* and submitted it to the Central Committee.²⁴ The document revealed a clear tone of disagreement with either of the right and left sectarianism. It blamed the leadership for not evolving any clear-cut, definite policy and line except reiterating what was stated in international documents. The document also expressed the expectation of the party cadres from their leaders. It pointed out that no revolutionary party could exist without a revolutionary political line and theory. Therefore, nothing should be imposed any more on the comrades in the name of the members of the Central Committee or Politburo unless they were absolutely convinced about its correctness.

The writer of the document consequently raised two questions: whether the armed struggle was really on the agenda for India as a whole and whether the Chinese path involving immediate armed guerrilla warfare and formation of liberation bases and

²³ A Note on the Present Situation in Our Country prepared by Ajoy Ghosh, S. A. Dange and S. V. Ghate and circulated on 30. 9. 1950

²⁴ A note entitled "A Reply to the New Central Committee" (Dated 1.7. 50) written by Nandalal Basu in the fictitious name *Sadananda*
S.B. Records. File-CPI Publications 1950

armies was applicable to the Indian situation in toto. A dogmatic approach to revolution without resolving those crucial questions, according to the author of the article, was infantile leftism and was, therefore, unacceptable. Thus the issues of doctrinal disputes not only created a bitter rivalry among the leaders of the party but also tended to shatter the party's organizational discipline.

The Refugee Question

Though the organization was in chaos, the leaders dissented and the members were confused, the popular connection of the party came to be strengthened in other forms. The idea of creating a broad-based people's front uniting the various layers of the struggling masses on their common issues and grievances widened the party's acceptability to the people. The process of mobilization started with the refugees from East Pakistan.²⁵

The truncated settlement of freedom cut out for West Bengal a unique position in the political landscape of post-independent India. The large influx of refugees, who came in bulk on occasions of communal insurgencies in 1948, 1950-51, 1952, 1961-1965 but who maintained a constant flow of migration, not only created a huge demographic pressure but raised a number of social, economic and psychological questions. The Government arranged a number of refugee camps at places like

²⁵ The following section is written on the basis of the informations collected from

i) Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbanke Udbastu Upanibesh* (Refugee Colonies in West Bengal), Kolkata, 1995

ii) Ganguly Indubaran: *Colonysmruti* (Memories of Colony Life) (Vol. I) (1948-1954), Ajudgarh, Kolkata, 1997

iii) Sinha Tushar: *Maranjayi Sangrame Bastuhara* (Refugees in The Struggle For Survival), Kolkata, 1999

Titagarh, Kandi, Howrah, Salua, Kasipur, Ghosuri, Ranaghat, Dhubulia, Bhadrakali, Bangaon, Panagarh, Bagjola with the provision of doles.²⁶ But what was needed was to provide them with some sort of permanent employment and residential land. The people who migrated from their homeland leaving their home and hearth needed both material and psychological rehabilitation and for this they placed their good faith on the Congress Government. The anti-communal disposition of the Congress vis-à-vis the communal holocaust conducted by the Muslim League led those uprooted people to hope for their promised land in the Congress regime in West Bengal. The communists did not have an easy access to the refugees who were initially favourably disposed towards the Congress Party.

But the actual experience of rehabilitation, which went contrary to the expectation, turned the tide in favour of the communists. Punjab which was another victim to partition had comparable problems. But there the problems could not acquire so much intensity because of such principles like the transfer of population. In 1947 the Central Government itself took the initiative to arrange the transfer of population in Western India. But just after a few years Nehru Government refused to repeat this action in case of the refugees from East Pakistan. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter written on February 17, 1950 to Dr. B. C. Roy denied the feasibility of any such proposal:

“...this business of shifting millions of people is entirely beyond our capacity. The mere attempt will create enormous difficulty and conflict. It is quite certain that not an inch of territory is going to be given us by Pakistan, except possibly by war. We really thus are face to face with ultimate alternatives.”²⁷

²⁶ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbange Udbastu Upanibesh*

²⁷ Collected from Chakrabarti Saroj: *With Dr B. C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record up to 1962)*, Kolkata, 1974, p. 157

Gross discrimination was alleged also in allocation of relief fund. Even the Congress Ministry at the state could not but protest against the unsympathetic attitude of the Central Government. In a letter written on December 1, 1949 to the Prime Minister Dr. B. C. Roy strongly reacted to the policy of the Centre:

"For months, the Government of India would not recognize the existence of refugee problems in East Pakistan and therefore, would not accept the liabilities on their account. The Provincial Government had to carry on as best as they could. And for these refugees, a magnificent sum of Rs. 20/- per capita has been granted by the Centre in two years."²⁸

Nehru's reply was also significant. He wrote:

"I do not know what the expenditure incurred on relief and rehabilitation has been for those coming from West Pakistan. Probably you are right in saying that it has been far more than that for refugees from East Pakistan. That surely has not been because of any desire to differentiate, but rather because of certain overwhelming factors. About half a million people came from western Pakistan to India even before Partition. We gave them no help at all. Then came a flood of about 5 to 6 million people in the course of roughly of 2 months. There was something elemental about this and we had to come out to face this situation. In eastern Pakistan the migration has been at a lower pace and rather gradual. In West Pakistan practically all Hindus or Sikhs have been driven out. In East Pakistan a very large number remained and it was your policy and ours not to do anything which might bring about a wholesale migration to West Bengal from eastern Pakistan. This would have led to tremendous misery and to a problem which hardly any Government would have been able to face.

Another question arises about the actual relief and rehabilitation measures taken in West Bengal for these refugees. Moneys actually sent to you as grant or loan have largely not been spent yet for rehabilitation." (December 2, 1949)²⁹

²⁸ Ibid. p. 142

²⁹ Ibid. p. 143

The unsympathetic tone of the Central Government, along with the State Congress's admission of the Centre's discrimination made the situation sensitive. Almost all the opposition parties sustained the cause of the refugees. The refugees themselves were organized to put pressure on an unsympathetic Government for the fulfilment of their purpose. They built up camp communities in each of their temporary habitats as their governing bodies and as their mouthpieces. These committees could act without any political affiliation and, therefore, invited all the political parties to take step for mobilization. The Communist Party, more than anyone else, identified itself with this struggling community and mobilized popular opinion against the Congress Government both at the Centre and the province.

Initially, however, the Communist Party did not show much interest about the refugees. The victims of communal politics were not considered as dependable forces of class struggle. It was feared that the intensity of class politics would be diluted by the intervention of the groups and people, who were still engrossed with a nationalist vision than the ambition to form a socialist system. But the continuous increase in the number of refugees and the growing disillusionment of the refugee population in the mainstream politics of the state created the possibility of making a powerful oppositional force. Indu Baran Ganguly who worked with a dual objective of organizing a social solidarity movement among the refugees as well as initiating them to communism reflected on the imperatives of the Communist Party to shake off its initial aversion to refugee question and win over those destitute people to their way of politics:

“The influx of the Hindu refugees in thousands from East Pakistan brought about a qualitative change in the material conditions of West Bengal. In this situation the power politics of the Communist Party lost its appeal

even to the party cadres. The party ultimately shed its indifference, which it did have to the cause of the refugees ever since the partition, and realized that in West Bengal the politics of class struggle without proper concern for the refugee issue would not be a viable one.”³⁰

Indeed, when the communists entered the scene the other left forces as well as the non-left opposition parties like the Hindu Mahasabha had already appeared with their message of social welfare and politics of struggle. So, the continuation of unwillingness of the Communist Party could only result in marginalization of the party among political supporters. At the initial stage the Communist Party encountered a lack of acceptability among the refugees. The communists also had to act in alliance with the members of Forward Bloc and Hindu Mahasabha. Just as the communists could not keep confidence in the refugees as genuine partners in class struggle, the refugees too were suspicious of the apocalyptic politics of the communists concerning the new nation-state. Soon, however, the Communist Party managed to capture the imagination of the refugees and mould their anti-Congress opinion into political action against an unpopular government.

The Communist Party, on the one hand, opened up a number of party cells ranging from local to provincial levels to make contacts with each of the refugee camps. On the other hand, the party tried to coordinate the camp committees by forming a central council. The communist-led refugee demonstrations at Sealdah station, Brigade Parade Ground, near the Governor's House at Esplanade clearly demonstrated the extent of mobilization by the Communist Party among the refugees. The process culminated in the formation of the United Central Refugee Council in 1950. It was a multi-party organization

³⁰ Ganguly Indubaran: *Colonysmriti* (Vol. I) (1948-1954), p 98

which included components like the Forward Bloc or the Hindu Mahasabha. Yet, the communists enjoyed the most prominent voice in this organization of the refugees ³¹.

This growing prominence of the Communist Party was, however, not just an outcome of political mobilization. Rather the members of the Communist Party initially entered among the refugees as social partners in their suffering and humiliation. Tushar Sinha who as the member of the Communist Party was connected with the process elaborated the perspective of the party's intervention:

"Everywhere the camp life told a tragic story. In most of the camps the superintendents were inhuman and insensitive to the problems of the refugees. Bribe taking, torture, rowdyism were rampant. It became really problematic for the refugees to carry on their daily lives in the camps."³²

The Communist Party shared this problem of the refugees and became a sincere partner of their day-to-day struggle of survival. Tushar Sinha wrote:

"The UCRC took up the cause of the refugees living in camps with earnest sincerity. It raised struggle on a number of issues like the problems faced by the refugees in the camp; the abolition of the colonies; the acquisition of electoral rights and citizenship for the refugees; the harassment of the refugees by police; the release of the prisoners; eviction of the street hawkers and the filing of cases against them; the problems of those refugees who took shelter in the deserted houses of the Muslim families; the closing and the threat of closure of the refugee camps by the Government; stopping of 'doles'; providing free primary education to the refugee students; introduction of vocational education; reduction of migration fee from the refugee students; foundation of cottage industry and co-operative in each of the camps; recognition of the rehabilitation colonies of the agrarian refugees."³³

³¹ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbanke Udbastu Upanibesh*

³² Sinha Tushar: *Maranjayi Sangrame Bastuhara*, p. 27

³³ Ibid. p. 21

He wrote further:

"On May 8, 1955 a conference of the camp refugees of West Bengal was held at Baroaritola of Krishnapur, 24 Parganas. ...Communist M. P. Renu Chakraborty presided over it. In that conference a number of demands were made for the betterment of the living conditions in the camps. The demands included the granting of the right to institute camp committees by the refugees; opening of worksite camps; allocation of jobs according to professional skill and training at the rehabilitation centers; granting of holiday on Sunday; providing fair wage; digging of tube-well; compensation for the cancellation of agreement at the Government's negligence; rehabilitation of the refugees of Dhapa, Manpur, Bagzola regions, conversion of the Cooper's Camp into rehabilitation camp; stoppage of police harassment."³⁴

In this manner the communists not only claimed the political and civil rights for the refugees but also highlighted some issues which were connected with the physical and social health of the community. Thus they were trying to cultivate among the refugees a sense of citizenship and the desire to create a civil society which the Congress Government either refused or failed to fulfil.

When the Congress Government showed indifference to the refugee population, the Communist Party appeared with its alternative proposal. The social acceptability of the communists among the refugees had already been established. Now their proposal was readily accepted. Indeed no aspect of the communist programme was so enthusiastically pursued by the refugees as the forcible occupation of fallow lands and the creation of habitations there. Several groups of refugees in most cases under the guidance and even active participation of the communist leaders took sudden possession of fallow lands and turned them into residential areas. The refugees mostly targeted the lands concentrated in the hands of the *zamindars* and

³⁴ Ibid. p. 37

landlords. The government was by no means indulgent and sympathetic. Rather there were several incidents of police onslaught on those settlements established by the refugees. But the police repression failed to break the refugee consolidation.

Thus there appeared a number of colonies in Naihati, Ranaghat, Bangaon, Bijoygarh and in many other places of Calcutta and its outskirts. Just as in regulating the camp life so in settling the colonies also the Communist Party played the role of a social organizer. Each of the colonies not only contained a number of residential quarters but also developed schools, roads and all sorts of arrangements to maintain a minimum standard of physical and social hygiene. Anil Sinha who as a member of the Communist Party was actively involved with the process narrated his experience:

“The “Executive Council” in its struggle for rehabilitation adopted a novel programme. Instead of the traditional ways of functioning like petition, procession, meeting and besiegement, it decided to launch direct action to take possession of the “soil” in West Bengal. It gave a call for action: ‘Since this Government is indifferent to our problems, we should no longer depend on it. We should be self-reliant and solve them at our own initiative. By capturing the fallow lands of the landlords and by investing your toil to them build up houses, schools, roads and drains, and turn them into localities. It is only by your collective effort and nothing else that you can rehabilitate yourselves, protect your property and prosper.’”³⁵

This process of setting up permanent refugee colonies on forcibly occupied land not only added a new dimension to the refugee movement but also wove a new role for the communists in the state. Instead of relying on an insensitive government the Communist Party induced the refugees to solve their problems by their self-initiative. A group of unfortunate people, who had

³⁵ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbanke Udbastu Upanibesh*, p. 9

so far been considered as a liability of the government, now consolidated itself as a pressure group and became the most powerful critic of the governmental policy.

While the refugees were politicized to adopt a policy of confrontation against an anti-people government, the other social groups too were harnessed to fraternize with the cause of the refugees and to make a unity of action. A communist-led student strike on January 18, 1949 on the refugee issue that took violent proportion causing police firing brought the communists to a veritable trial of strength with the Government. The impact of this movement was later recounted by Saroj Chakrabarti who was the personal assistant to Chief Minister B. C. Roy:

“The episode rocked the whole country. An important statement on communist activities in West Bengal was made in Parliament in February by Prime Minister Nehru who declared that during the past year (1948) the CPI had adopted an attitude not only of open hostility to the Government but one which could be described as bordering upon revolt.”³⁶

While Mr. Chakrabarti commented on the Government’s response to the communist challenge, Tushar Sinha, an activist of the CPI, viewed the incident in the context of the people’s growing disillusionment with the Congress and gradual acceptance of a protestant politics:

“On January 14, 1948 during the visit of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to inaugurate the Gandhighat at Barrackpur, the refugees who took shelter at Sealdah Station took out a procession to place their demands before him. But the police launched an attack on those masses. Eighteen rounds of tear gas were applied to them. This incident came as an eye-opener for those uprooted people. They were irrevocably disillusioned about Congress rule. The refugees made repeated attempts to organize processions. Repeatedly the police crushed them. The students of West Bengal who were conspicuous by their fighting spirit reacted to this incident of police

³⁶ Chakrabarti Saroj: *With Dr. B. C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record up to 1962)*, p. 116

repression. On January 18, 1949, they arranged a meeting at the premises of the University of Calcutta to celebrate the 'Indonesia Day' and to protest against the ghastly police assault on the refugees. The police made a desperate bid to stop that meeting of the SFI and the City of Calcutta had a bloodbath. ...The following few days witnessed the city life hissing with anger."³⁷

Anil Sinha too in his memoirs noted about the social dimension of the refugee movement:

"The struggle for rehabilitation at its own interest tended to attract the cooperation of the working class. The UCRC directed its cadres to organize trade unions, on the one hand, and, on the other, to popularize the issues of rehabilitation of the refugees among the trade unions. In the same way, the teachers and students, Government and private employees, and women were also convinced of the necessity of rehabilitation. Again, the refugees imparted their support to the struggling labourers. In the industrial zones of Baranagar, Barrackpur, Belgharia, Durgapur the workers and the refugees manifested an unprecedented fraternal spirit."³⁸

Not only various social groups coalesced together and upheld the cause of the refugees but politically also the refugee issue became a common rallying point of all the opposition parties. Mr. Sinha also commented on this political aspect of the refugee movement:

"At this stage the relations of the left parties in West Bengal were strained by intense distrust, disagreement and dissensions. They could never unite on any issue. But the influx of million of refugees made the situation in the state extremely vulnerable. The deplorable life of the refugees and their struggling spirit created deep sensation among all the left parties. In this situation, Sri Ambika Chakrabarti took the initiative for uniting the left parties on the refugee cause. All the left parties except RSP responded to the call. A common programme was formulated. The unity of cause laid the foundation of the Left Front of the present days."³⁹

³⁷ Sinha Tushar: *Maranjayi Sangrame Bastuhara*, p.13

³⁸ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbange Udbastu Upanibesh*, p 38

³⁹ Ibid. p. 12

Indu Baran Ganguly who had a double identity of belonging to the refugee group and being a political cadre of the Communist Party too emphasized on the twofold outcome of the refugee movement. On the one hand, the refugee issue stood as the single unifying force for the communists who otherwise proved to be a divisive group at that time. On the other hand, the acceptance by the refugees ensured the identity of the Communist Party as a mass party in the politics of the state. He wrote:

“At a time, when the political parties of West Bengal were torn by dissensions, democratic unity was achieved at the refugee front and widespread mass movements were launched. It is also noteworthy that despite the lack of unity and cohesion of the Communist Party, this large scale mass movements of the refugees were led by the immigrant communists.”

He mentioned that throughout 1951 the UCRC made incessant struggle on issues like indifferent and hostile attitude of the government officers to the refugee question, permanent rehabilitation of the refugees who took shelter in camps or deserted houses. According to him,

“This action, on the one hand, mitigated the internal dissensions of the Communist Party and prepared it for future struggle. On the other hand, it consolidated the power of the Communist Party to fight in the first general election of the country in 1952. Alongside, the popular sympathy, which the party had lost by its slogans like ‘People’s War’ in 1942 and ‘Sham Independence’ in 1948, was largely recovered. The untiring, uncompromising and leading role of the Communist Party in organizing meetings, processions, campaigns, committees at camps and colonies led the people to reassess the character of the Communist Party as a popular force.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ganguly Indubaran: *Colonysmruti*, pp. 126-127

In other words, a political alternative to the Congress Government that was backed by a united mass support emerged in the state around the refugee question.

The refugee issue became explosive, when it was linked to the land question. The Communist Party conscientiously argued that by confiscating the large quantity of land, which remained concentrated in the hands of a few *zamindars*, it was possible to give shelter to those unfortunate victims of partition. The demand for the abolition of landlordism and the redistribution of land among the tillers, which was central to the Communist Party's agrarian programme, got further moral justification as a way to resolve the problem of rehabilitation of the refugees. Anil Sinha who took a lead in the self-initiative of the refugees explained the logical connection of the issue of rehabilitation and the general land policy of the communists:

"The call to capture land was intended to make a direct assault on landlordism. It was not only an urban phenomenon but in rural areas too the exterminated peasants came with much enthusiasm for capturing land. Abolition of landlordism was a longstanding demand of the Krishak Sabha. But none except the *tebhaga* movement could make such a direct attack on the *zamindari* system. The refugees out of desperation had recourse to such action. The members of the Legislative Assembly like Bimal Singh who belonged to the *zamindari* families got frightened. It was under their pressure that the Government made legislation for the eviction of the unauthorized occupants of land. They were panicky about the future. Finally the abolition of landlordism was enacted in 1953 and it was followed by a Land Reform Act of 1955. This anti-feudal and democratic spirit of the refugee movement has not been fully appreciated even today."⁴¹

The indifference of the Congress Government to fulfil this demand was interpreted as the expression of the bourgeois disposition of this political regime. On the floor of the Assembly Jyoti Basu pointed out that during the Chief Ministership of

⁴¹ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbanke Udbastu Upanibesh*, p. 38

Surhawardy a survey of waste land of West Bengal was conducted with the purpose of accommodating the refugees there. But the plan was not followed up by the Congress Government. Basu explained this inaction of the Congress Government in terms of its class position. He commented:

“...these lands mostly belonged to the rich *zamindars* of West Bengal and naturally this Government which represents the big *zamindars* and the big profiteers cannot possibly take away the lands of those big *zamindars*. If they requisition these lands they would have to buy them at proper prices while those individual *zamindars* know that if they at all sell the lands they can sell them profitably at a huge price privately.”⁴²

In other words, it was the same bourgeois and landlord classes, which through the exercise of political power spread a network of exploitation over the peasants in field and the workers in factory, that was identified as the major force in retarding the process of rehabilitation. The solution to this vexed problem of rehabilitation, according to the Communist Party, lay in dismantling the class character of the present government. To achieve this objective the party gave a call to its members and units:

“It should not be forgotten that the refugee problem is the handiwork of imperialism and its collaborators as well as the Congress-League ruling establishment. They have provoked communal actions, designed communal riots, and by partitioning the country have kept open the channels for spreading further communal and ethnic violence.

...So long as the existing ruling system sponsored by the imperialists, capitalists and landlords would remain in action the roots of communal and ethnic tension would not be destroyed, and it would often burst into violence.

⁴²A Debate on Refugee Issue in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly-Third Session-February 1951-a speech delivered by Jyoti Basu
Collected from the Assembly Proceedings

In a similar way, this administration would hamper the solution of the problem of refugee rehabilitation. Rather new refugees would come up, the older ones would obtain neither settlement nor employment.”⁴³

Thus by incorporating the refugee issue within the corpus of the general struggle against the bourgeois system of exploitation the CPI generated the possibility of a unified resistance to the Congress regime.

Towards Electoralism

However, amidst this chaotic situation the idea of using the immediate issues of popular grievances and utilizing the strength of the democratic opinion in the country to build up a mass movement opened a new avenue for the leftist politics. This led to a major revision about the attitude of the Communist Party towards electoral politics. Ranadive line and Andhra thesis were juxtaposed in assessing the degree of revolutionary spirit of the different social classes and in formulating the revolutionary tactics. Nevertheless, both were firmly embedded in the idea of revolution as the only means of social change. But the subsequent debate tried to set the party on a new line of action. The revolutionary change as the ultimate objective was still the cardinal aspect of the party's political programme. But waiting for that final shot which would not be fired in near future and ignoring in the meantime the prospect of limited reforms for immediate benefits did not seem realistic to the new thinkers within the party. Rather an optimistic assessment of the electoral process was made. The note which the new thinkers produced mentioned:

“To continue our present negative attitude to the election would mean to isolate ourselves even from our supporters, to doom ourselves to a state of political impotence, to hand over the masses to socialists, Congress

⁴³ S. B. Records-CPI Refugees-1950

factions and other reformists. It would mean losing a great opportunity to popularise our programme, to reforge our links with the people, to build the unity of the left parties and to develop a mass movement against the present government.”⁴⁴

So, there were three imperatives that led the Communist Party to revise its view of electoral process. Electoral means would offer the party a popular platform to announce its programme that the underground politics could not always provide. The neglect of the opportunities of immediate action and waiting for a far-off revolution might lead the party to virtual inaction. In the absence of the communist initiative the other leftist parties might step in and capture popular leadership. In other words, the participation in election was the strategy of survival for a party whose underground activities could not overpower the coercive apparatus of the state by mass mobilization.

The international directive approved of this new turn of the Indian communists. Failing to resolve the ideological conflict the CPI deputed a commission of four members – Rajeshwar Rao, Basavapunnaiya, Ajoy Ghosh and Dange to Moscow to discuss with the leaders of the CPSU. The Central Committee of the CPSU too set up a commission comprising Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov, Suslov, headed by Stalin, to assist the CPI in this regard. On the basis of the Soviet guideline the politburo of the CPI in 1951 drafted a programme which consequently became the party's first constitution. In this programme the party's assessment of the Indian State was made clear. It was commented that the new state that had come into existence was essentially the same old imperialist state. The Congress

⁴⁴ A Note on the Present Situation in Our Party' prepared by Ajoy Ghosh, S. A. Dange, S.V. Ghatge and circulated on 30.9.1950
Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VI, p. 463

Government too was installed in power by the British imperialists, as it was a government pledged to the protection and preservation of foreign British capital in India. It was a bourgeois-landlord state led by the big bourgeoisie, which was allying with feudal and semi-feudal landlordism and collaborating with foreign finance capital, in pursuit of the capitalist path of development. The Communist Party aimed at dismantling this state structure.

However, the distinction between the immediate task and the ultimate aim too was made clear. While adhering to the aim of building a socialist society, the Communist Party was not aspiring to achieve it at the present stage of development of India. Considering the backwardness of the economic development of India and the weaknesses of the mass organizations of workers, peasants and the toiling intelligentsia the party found it difficult at present to carry out the socialist transformation. The immediate goal was set in replacing the present anti-democratic and anti-popular government by a new government of people's democracy. As for the path of the Indian revolution the document suggested neither Ranadive's prescription of insurrectionary activities nor the Chinese way of agrarian revolution but emphasized on the need of the united effort of all of the progressive forces irrespective of their class status. Similarly, to intensify the preparation for revolution the draft programme also pointed out the need to utilize the electoral process and the parliamentary instruments. The participation in election was thus adopted as a part of the revolutionary programme. In this way the CPI with the help of the CPSU tried to solve its ideological conflict.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ i. *Programme of the Communist Party of India, 1951*

ii. *Statement of Policy of the Communist Party of India, 1951*

Published by the Communist Party of India

In the first general election of the nation after independence the Communist Party appeared to be a major contender for political power. The comrades of class war were chosen as electoral allies. The Communist Party formed a left coalition with the other left parties like the Socialist Republican Party founded by Sarat Bose and the Forward Bloc.⁴⁶ The attitude of adaptation was clear in the election manifesto which upheld a peculiarly moderate programme. With a promise of nationalization of the key industries it welcomed the assistance of foreign governments and private capitalists for general industrial development. In agrarian sector it reiterated the slogan of abolition of landlordism but the manifesto also assured that the party would not touch the small *zamindars* or the rich peasants. In other words, the manifesto was designed to endear a number of layers in the population. They were consolidated on a common programme of opposing the Congress government which the party branded as a regime of 'national betrayal'.⁴⁷

One of the main purposes of participation in election by the communists, i.e., to create a popular platform for their party, was served during the election campaign. Jyoti Basu narrated his own experience of election campaigns in his constituency at Baranagar:

"The party made me candidate from the Barahanagar constituency of the 24 Parganas for the Legislative Assembly. Barahanagar was a new place for me. Our party too did not have a strong base there. The original residents were relatively orthodox.

⁴⁶ Sen Ranen, *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha (1948-1964)*

⁴⁷ Election Manifesto of the C. P. I.: 1952

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VII

But when we started our electoral campaign at Barahanagar, the local people made a spontaneous response. The entire party of the locality became involved with the electoral campaign. Numerous meetings and gatherings, sometimes small and sometimes big, could be organized.”⁴⁸

Before 1951, despite revolutionary fervour, as an underground organization the party often lacked in popular dimension and its radical message did not always reach the people. Joining the electoral field the party kept the revolution at abeyance but found a platform to educate people about a revolutionary culture.

The electoral performance of the CPI too was quite impressive.⁴⁹ The Communist Party won 26 seats in the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal defeating seven ministers from the Congress. Four seats from Calcutta; ten from the urban constituencies of Howrah, Burdwan, 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Midnapore; twelve from the rural constituencies of those five districts; one from an urban constituency of Darjeeling (Kalimpong) and the other from a rural constituency of Malda (Gazole) went in favour of the Communist Party. In the national Parliament the CPI sent five candidates.

But the communist victory could not be assessed in statistical terms alone. The CPI defeated labor minister Kalipada Mukherjee in a predominantly working class constituency in Buzbuz, the judicial minister who had drafted the West Bengal Security Act, the education minister-H. N. Choudhuri, and the

⁴⁸ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Pratham Khanda)*, p 109

⁴⁹ *Election Results of West Bengal Statistics and Analysis (1952-1991)*

Communist Party of India (Marxist) West Bengal State Committee, Kolkata, 1995
& *Swadhinata*, January 1952

revenue minister B. C. Sinha,- both of whom were *zamindars* running in their own *zamindaris*. In the predominantly refugee constituencies of Tallygunj, Kalighat, Belgachia and Maniktala in Calcutta the communists achieved spectacular success. It was precisely among the zones and the classes, where the Communist Party during the years of insurgency and militant social mobilization cultivated its area of influence, that the party gained its electoral success.⁵⁰ No wonder that the Communist Party in the following years, instead of a single-minded ideological opposition to the Congress, concentrated on intensive social mobilization and consequently could ensure the social legitimacy of its political ideology as a step towards forming an alternative government. A popular face of communism was drawn into the social matrix of the state of West Bengal to bring political success to the Communist Party.

Therefore, by 1952 the communist politics in West Bengal reached a critical juncture. The positive future of the party in electoral politics was pretty apparent from the country's first election. This was definitely alluring, particularly at a situation, when the prospect of revolution was elusive. But the optimization of electoral politics ran the risk of frustrating the revolutionary objective of the party. This would have two kinds of repercussions on the fate of the party. On the one hand, the party could be thrown out of the doctrinal framework of communism. On the other hand, this ideological debasement could also tarnish the party's popular image which had a radical

⁵⁰ Lahiri Abani: *Tirish Challisher Bangla – Rajnit O Andoloner Abhijnata Prasange* (Bengal in The Thirties and The Forties – In The Perspective of Politics and Movement) (Interviewed and edited by Ranajit Dasgupta), Kolkata, 1999

imprint on it. It is noteworthy that the party's electoral gains came mostly from the regions where it had launched an intense experiment in insurrection during the preceding phase. This was a clear proof that the people were disappointed with the tactical whims of the party leadership but not about the political visions of the party. Therefore, even if the party had to thrive in electoral politics it had to formulate its strategy in consonance with the revolutionary ideal which it had hitherto upheld. The prospect of the Communist Party in West Bengal, therefore, would depend on balancing the electoral praxis and fidelity to a frame of ideas. The former would ensure the party's survival. The latter would legitimize its identity.

Chapter - III

A People's Party in Progress (1952-1962)

Scopes and Possibilities

The election results of 1952 imparted a few lessons for the Communist Party. The electoral success of the communists, though not staggering, was definitely encouraging for the party. In order to realize the electoral prospects, the party was required to maintain a careful public posture. The spirit of radicalism which outlived the revisionist sloth and the reckless adventurism made deep impressions on popular perceptions about communist politics. The electoral concerns of the party, therefore, could not afford to lose sight of this radical lineage. On the other hand, the bindings of constitutionalism had to be borne in mind. In other words, the party was required to evolve a better alternative to the Congress regime as far as it was practicable within the parliamentary structure.

The decades of the '50s and the '60s were marked by a series of balancing acts by the Communist Party. Banking upon the growing disillusionment of the people with the Congress regime the Communist Party reinforced a political culture of mass protest. From this germinated an anti-Congress spirit that immediately benefited the Communist Party in electoral politics. Though the communists failed to capture power immediately, they consolidated their position as an oppositional force and successfully held out the promise of an alternative government. The politics of protest, however, was not merely a constitutional exercise. Its revolutionary potentialities too had to be utilized for the fulfilment of the ultimate objective of the party. Opinions within the party kept up a note of caution that by seeking electoral power the party could move away from its ideological moorings.

On the Agrarian Front

The immediate task for the party after the Elections of 1952 was to conduct a review of its electoral performance. The chief limitation of the party's performance in the Elections of 1952 was found in the agrarian sector. Jyoti Basu who led the party in the Legislative Assembly admitted:

"We have reviewed the election results of 1952 at the provincial committee of the party. While taking note of our success, we also detected some weak points in our policy. Our main weakness was that our success was limited to urban and industrial regions. But in the countryside our position was relatively weak. The provincial committee decided to take some measures to overcome this weakness. Special emphasis was given on such steps like the strengthening of the mass movements and mass organizations, consolidation and extension of electoral success."¹

The party made a bid to expand its membership at the peasant front. The persecution by the state and the internal dissensions within the party in the late '40s had a disastrous effect on the membership of the party in the peasant front. In 1952 the members of Krishak Sabha numbered only 30000. In 1953 the figure rose to 104000.² In April 1954 the Central Committee adopted a resolution which defined the party's tasks on the peasant front.³ This resolution stated that the Congress agrarian legislations were the products of the growth of peasant struggle and the general development of the democratic movement. Therefore, if the peasants' movements were more organized and the democratic movement more advanced, the

¹ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Pratham Khanda)*, p. 114

² Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishaksabhar Itihas*

³ Our Tasks among the Peasant Masses – Resolution adopted by the Central Committee of the Party in April 1954

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VII

government would be compelled to grant further concessions. But at the same time, the resolution warned that there was no room for complacency about those achievements because those left-handed concessions had many loopholes which would frustrate their objectives. Besides, the government was alleged to have resorted to severe police repression against the struggling peasants.

By assessing the present agrarian situation in this manner, the Communist Party adopted a twofold strategy to mobilize the peasants. First, despite maintaining a vigilant and critical attitude towards the Congress legislations, it did not totally disapprove of their effectiveness. Rather it emphasized the fact that by utilizing the concessions the party could go for a more vigorous movement. While the first measure taught them the lesson to face the 'tricks' and repression of the government, the second tactical measure was related to the formation of class organizations and the formulation of the strategy of struggle.

In this regard, there were two lines of thinking. On the one hand, the demands of the different categories of the peasants should be identified and if necessary, separate organizations should be created for these categories. Thus the Central Committee pointed out the urgent necessity for mobilizing the agricultural labourers into a separate organization. On the other hand, the party also emphasized the need for linking the peasant struggle with the working class movement and the movement of the toiling masses in general against capitalism and imperialism. For this the party would have to make determined effort to send working class party cadres from industrial centres to neighbouring agrarian areas to develop the peasant movement. Similarly, the demands of the working class too should strike a chord with the peasantry. Again, the peasants were to be roused

against the manoeuvres of warmongers designed and controlled by the foreign powers like the U.S.A. and Britain. Thus instead of aiming at an immediate revolution, a broad-based mass movement was envisaged within the corpus of constitutional politics.

The tone of moderation was also apparent in the formulation of the demands of the peasantry. The charter of demands included seizure of land from the landlords and their redistribution among the peasants and agricultural labourers. This was intended to abolish landlordism without compensation. Alongside, the cancellation of the debts of peasants and artisans to moneylenders and providing long-term cheap credit to enable them to purchase implements, seeds and manure were emphasized. It was hoped that an increase in rural wages would improve the living conditions of the agricultural labourers, while the maintenance of the prices for agricultural products at a fair level, reduction of tax burden on the peasants and irrigation facilities would benefit the small peasants. So, the demands concentrated mainly on the immediate and pressing grievances of the peasantry. But about such questions like the characterization of the agrarian structure under the Congress rule and a general peasant policy of the party the Committee was either silent or vaguely answered. It raised a few questions such as

i) What were the features of agrarian economy of the country, and whether the Congress agrarian legislations acted to keep the feudal character of agriculture in tact or weaken it, and tend towards the development of a capitalist mode of production in agrarian sector? If it was the latter, to what extent and in what form?

ii) While concretely formulating the agrarian demands, was there any need to take general propaganda slogans, or was it enough to have current slogans of agitation that could be modified from place to place suiting the needs of the development of the movement?

But the questions remained unresolved because the Central Committee itself admitted that it could not have yet come to conclusions on them. This lack of clear vision was also an indication that the party was not thinking in terms of an alternative structure but was trying to rectify certain ills in the existing structure to make it more endurable for the toiling masses. At the same time the need was also felt for preparing the masses for the more important political struggle from a position of relative strength.

Militancy or Moderation: A Countdown

The attitude of adaptability in agrarian sector was, however, the outcome of the party's general policy. The resolution adopted at the party's third Congress at Madurai in 1953 stated:

"While adhering to the aim of building a socialist society the Communist Party is not demanding the establishment of socialism in our country in the present stage of our development. In view of the backwardness of the economic development of India and of the weakness of the mass organisations of workers, peasants and toiling intelligentsia, our party does not find it possible at present to carry out socialist transformations in our country. But our party regards as quite mature the task of replacing the present anti-democratic and anti-popular government by a new government of People's Democracy created on the basis of a coalition of all democratic anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces in the country, capable of effectively guaranteeing the rights of the people, of giving land to the peasants gratis, of protecting our national industries against the competition of foreign goods and of ensuring the industrialisation of the country, of securing a higher standard of living to the working class, of riding the people of unemployment

and thus placing the country on the wide road of progress, cultural advancement and independence.”⁴

To achieve this aim the party adopted a programme which called for the strengthening of democracy. The programme included restriction to the rights of the President; extension of the power of the local governments; reconstruction of the states on linguistic basis; introduction of universal, equal and direct suffrage to all citizens irrespective of gender, caste and religion; replacement of police by militia; elimination of mercenary army by a national military force. In the field of agriculture and industry too it aimed at creating a good life for the toiling masses within the existing structure.

The accommodative tone was further strengthened in the fourth Congress of the party at Palghat in 1956. At Palghat even the resolution adopted at the Madurai Congress was branded as an example of left sectarianism. The Palghat report appreciated the Madurai resolution for its programme to deal with the internal problems of the country but found some incorrectness in its understanding of the foreign policy of the Indian Government. The Palghat report stated that the Madurai Congress was held under the shadow of a grave menace represented by Pact between the United States and Pakistan that made Pakistan an American war-base and thus became a direct threat to India's sovereignty and freedom. According to the Palghat report the Madurai resolution truly assessed the intensity of the crisis. But what it failed to assess was the changing role of India Government for the consolidation of peace, democracy and freedom. The Palghat resolution comments:

“...beginning with the Pak-U.S. Pact which directly threatened India's sovereignty and independence, the foreign policy of the Indian Government has steadily undergone a radical change – a change of far-reaching

⁴ Programme of the CPI – Adopted in the third Congress at Madurai
Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-VII, p. 291

significance. Earlier, despite its demarcation from and opposition to the imperialists on several issues, it was essentially a policy influenced by British imperialism. Today, despite the vacillations and inconsistencies that still persist to some extent, it is essentially an independent policy, a policy of peace. This is an orientation for which the democratic forces and the Communist Party had been consistently fighting and they rejoice in it as a great victory for the people.”⁵

According to this report, the signing of the pact between the United States and Pakistan was coincided and followed by such events like Chinese Premier Chou En-lai’s visit to India, the visits of Nehru to China and U.S.S.R., the visit of N.A. Bulganin, the Premier of the U.S.S.R., and N.S. Khrushchev, the first Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. All these marked the beginning of a united struggle against imperialism and showed that difference in political and social systems constituted no barrier to the establishment of fraternal relations between countries. These were not merely political achievements but they were expected to leave a major impact on the Indian economy. The imperialist forces had a tendency to keep countries like India backward and dependent and, therefore, their programmes of aid and collaboration were often tied with humiliating conditions. On the other hand, the trade pact with the U.S.S.R and its promise to help such projects like the building of steel plants appeared to be much more open-ended and beneficial.

It seems, therefore, that instead of a single-ended programme of turning the system upside down the prospect of a better world upon the foundation of capitalism was not entirely unacceptable. In other words, a distinction was made between

⁵ Report to the Fourth Party Congress – Placed by the Central Committee of the CPI for discussion by the delegates of the Party Congress held at Palghat from April 9-29, 1956

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol -VII, p. 547

the immediate and the ultimate objectives. The final goal of the party was the creation of a classless society whereas temporarily the party aspired to build a system in which the interests of the oppressed classes were somewhat protected. The final target was to be achieved through an armed revolution of the masses and, therefore, needed prolonged and intensive preparation. The limited vision, on the other hand, was likely to be realized through the exercise of electoral power. The revolutionary aim was set in consonance with the doctrinal directives of scientific socialism. The temporary but immediate programme, on the other hand, would enable the party to emerge as an alternative to the Congress in electoral contests.

However, even in electoral experiments the Communist Party did not entirely abandon the radical posture. Ajoy Ghosh who became the party's General Secretary in 1951 constantly reminded partymen of the lessons of the Elections of 1952:

"It is interesting to note that in those areas where the party could build mass organizations among the workers and the peasants and where the mass movements under the proletarian leadership could acquire a militant character, the party could successfully challenge the Congress in electoral contest too. But in places which did not have such conditions the democratic movement too was not founded on a solid basis."⁶

It was also necessary to justify the party line before the ordinary members of the party, who had been initiated into communism to wage a revolutionary war for creating a classless society. While rejoicing at the electoral performance of the Communist Party, a section of the party members disapproved

⁶ Ghosh Ajoy: *Ganatantrik Front O Sarbahara Netritwa* (Matamat-Weekly, May 22, 1954)

of the electoral strategy to reach the revolutionary aim. The party leaders admitted this lack of consensus and its pernicious effects upon the party's organization. In a meeting of the West Bengal Provincial Committee of the party the following statement was made:

"It is undeniable that a small fragment of the party members that also includes a few leaders is vehemently criticizing the line followed by the Provincial Committee. The inner party crisis of the recent years is primarily due to this dissension between the Provincial Committee and those party members. The dissident members on many occasions have shown utter disregard for long standing party rules and principles. The main point of criticism is that the Provincial Committee is both averse to struggle and opposed to the unity of the party. Naturally, when some of the members as well as the leaders of the party have such an opinion about the topmost unit of this party at the province, it cannot but create a crisis in the party. So, it has become an immediate necessity for us to review the issues of dissension and resolve them through interaction among the members."⁷

In other words, the problem of balancing the revolutionary rhetoric and the electoral practices that had come to surface since the party's entry into electoral politics was intensified with the rise of the party's electoral ambition.

⁷ After the Elections of 1952 the Central Committee of the CPI adopted a resolution called 'On the Results of the General Elections (1952) and the Tasks Before the Party' (circulated in 1952) that was approved by the Provincial Committee. This resolution appreciated the role of the electoral process in strengthening the democratic forces of the country. In such a situation tremendous prospect was found for a broad-based mass movement and a broad-based coalition with the like-minded political parties to create a political alternative to the Congress Government. However, the same resolution noted down the persistent criticism by the 'petty-bourgeois lefts' of this party line as 'opportunism', 'betrayal of revolution', 'watering down of programme'. The Central Committee also admitted that the lack of cohesion in the party's organization was one of the major weaknesses of the party and it set a guideline for the Provincial Committee to overcome this limitation. In the context of this instruction the Provincial Committee made a statement in September, 1952
Collected from S.B. Records-File: CPI Publication 1952

Populism in Action

Ideological debates apart, the growing disenchantment with the Congress rule in West Bengal also brought among the people a mood of militancy which the Communist Party could not ignore. The issues like the rise of tram-fare created such occasions. When the rise of one paise of tram-fare in second class compartments came into effect since July 1, 1953, the Communist Party made it an issue for agitation through mass mobilization. Indeed, the rise of tram-fare in itself could not be a very strong point to build up a mass movement because there was no increase in tram-fare for a long period. And even after increase the fares were remarkably low. But it was a symbolic issue that gave opening to a pent-up discontent and the Communist Party picked it up to extend its base among the masses. The rise of fare was resisted on the ground that there was no statutory obligation on the part of the Tram Company to carry out improvement or expansion scheme. So, the Company was alleged to have increased the financial burden on the public without the guarantee of improvement of the public facility. Hence the resistance got a moral justification. The movement was successful. The opposition compelled the Company to relinquish the enhanced fare structure.

The year 1953 was marked by continuous labour unrest such as movements by the cotton bag workers in Naihati, strike of paper mill workers at Titagarh on issues like stop of arbitrary entrenchment, rise of wages, etc. In the following years too the same issues raised a series of labour movements such as corporation workers' movement in 1956; the labour strike in the Iron Mill of Burnpur in 1958; strike of the port workers in 1958; celebration of Demand Day on 26th March 1958 by the workers and other employees in both government and private sectors; students' strike in September 1958 against the rise of college fees; strike of the cotton bag producers in 1959. The

Central Government employees under the United Struggle Council went into protest against retrenchment and for the fulfilment of their financial demands. They went on continuous strike since July 11, 1960. The Central Government issued an ordinance by declaring the strikes of the government employees as illegal. A strong wave of protest followed this arbitrary undemocratic action of the government. The movement acquired greater intensity as the State Government employees joined them on the same types of economic demands. The bank employees (The State Bank of India) too went to strike for betterment of the service conditions. Leftist trade union leaders like Jyoti Basu along with other leftist leaders like Jatin Chakravorty came to the forefront.

In February 1954 a long-term teachers' strike along with civil disobedience movement created a stir all over the state. The students also squatted with their teachers near Raj Bhavan. The UCRC issued a statement supporting the teachers' strike. The teachers' movement was organized by All Party Teachers' Struggle Co-ordination Committee. The Communist-led teachers' union – A.B.T.A. was at the forefront of this movement. On February 10 the strike started at the call of A.B.T.A. On February 12 also a partial *bazar hartal* (strike at market) was made. Threefold demands were made:

a) responsibility and expenses of education of citizens should be entirely accepted and borne by the government b) education system which would be suitable for the people of all categories and which would help solving unemployment problem should be introduced c) economic uplift of the teachers on whom rested the great responsibility of educating the children should be ensured. The teachers launched the civil disobedience movement on February 18.

The strike was called off on February 21 on three conditions: a) All the teachers arrested in connection with the movement should be released unconditionally b) No disciplinary

action should be taken against any teacher c) The door for negotiations about salary and dearness allowance should be kept open.

While focusing on the issues of class interests, the Communist Party also upheld some regional grievances in order to protect the regional identity of the people of West Bengal. In 1958, Nehru signed a treaty with the Pakistan Government agreeing to transfer Berubari union of Jalpaiguri to Pakistan. But when a Bill on that issue was sent by the Central Government to the West Bengal State Legislature for approval, it raised a huge protest from the left parties in opposition. It questioned the validity of such a bill as it was formulated without consulting the public opinion of the province. The opposition parties also criticized B.C. Roy's Government, as it did not protest against such an unconstitutional act of the Centre. A general mass movement encompassing the labourers, peasants and middle class intelligentsia was organized against this measure. For the first time since independence a bill sent by the Central Government was returned by the State legislature of West Bengal without being approved.

In 1956 a lot of heat was generated by the issue of border adjustments between Bengal and Bihar, particularly over two places – Purulia and Kisan Ganj. The responsibility to settle the question was given to the States Reorganization Commission. But popular opinion in West Bengal accused the Commission of favouring the cause of Bihar vis-à-vis West Bengal. Amidst this situation the Central Congress leadership suggested the integration of Bengal and Bihar to form one state out of the two. Dr. B. C. Roy accepted the proposal conditionally. He proposed that the internal structure of the two regions should continue as it was, and both Bengali and Hindi should be the official languages. The principal capital of the state should be Calcutta and Patna should be considered as the second capital.

But this merger issue, as this proposed union was called, was disfavoured by a strong public opinion as an assault on the regional identity of the people of the states. It was condemned as a conspiracy of the Congress Government at the Centre that was supported by the Congress Government at the state. On the other hand, demand was made for reorganization of the states on linguistic basis. An association named Rajya Punargathan Samyukta Parishad led by Mohit Moitra launched direct action to foil the merger. The CPI charged the Congress Governments in both the state and the Centre of betraying the interests of the people and abandoning the principle of linguistic states. The party warned that this would create a condition in which the minorities would continue to be embittered and the people of West Bengal too would become resentful. The party interpreted this question and presented it before people in the following manner:

“When the struggle for various democratic demands were gaining momentum since 1952-53, the ruling class made a grave and scornful conspiracy against the people of West Bengal. It came through a proposal made by Dr. B. C. Roy in 1956 to unite Bengal and Bihar into a single province. But Dr. Roy could not come up with such a proposal unless at the highest level of the Congress Party an evil design was made against the people of West Bengal. If Bengal and Bihar would merge into a single state, the conflict between the Bengalis and the Biharis would perpetuate. The racial conflict, on the other hand, would calm down the growing militancy of the popular movement in West Bengal. The Communist Party anticipated this grave consequence and, therefore, took an immediate step to assume the leadership of the united resistance against the merger.”⁸

⁸ Moitra Mohit: Pashchimbanger Ganaandolner Abhignatar Aloke (In View of The Mass Movements in West Bengal)
Collected from Ghosh Niren: *Deshbibhag O Nana Prasanga* (Partition and Other Issues), Kolkata, 1990, p. 34

Finally in the face of this widespread public movement the merger plan was abandoned. The boundary question too was settled through a series of negotiations and committees. West Bengal got possession of Purulia and a strip of territory called Kisan Ganj went to Bihar. Jyoti Basu in his interview to Biplab Dasgupta in later years recalled the importance of this leadership of the Communist Party in achieving success in electoral politics in later years:

“The teachers’ movement and the resistance to merger, more than anything else, captured the imagination of the Bengali middle class by the leftist way of politics.”⁹

While upholding the cause of regional integrity and the democratic rights of the people of West Bengal, the Communist Party also fraternized with the struggling people in other parts of the country and thus tried to invoke a general protest against the oppressive Central Government and its imperial allies. The party thus raised the question of minority rights against the oppression on the Bengalis in Assam. In 1960 Assam Government made Assamese the state language by replacing English. The minority Bengalis who protested against it became victims of brutal ethnic discrimination. The Communist Party in West Bengal immediately took up the issue and organized protests, demonstrations and *hartals*. It was an issue in which the Communists fought hand in hand with the Congress Government.¹⁰ Though the Act could not be nullified, the Central Government in 1961 granted some special rights to the minorities. Similarly in the middle of the 1950s, when the

⁹ Dasgupta Biplab: *Jyotibabur Sange (Pratham Parba, Up to 1967)* (With Jyoti Basu, Vol. 1), Kolkata, 1987, p. 54

¹⁰ *Swadhinata*, August 1960, December 1961

struggle for freedom in Goa assumed serious proportion, the Communist Party of West Bengal provided full-fledged support to it.

Nowhere was the messianic image of the Communist Party more strongly built than among the refugees from East Pakistan. The problem of rehabilitation of the refugees, far from being resolved, was accentuated by the half-hearted and miscalculated venture of the Congress Government. The issue of rehabilitation involved not only deterioration of material condition but also mental alienation. When the Government of West Bengal made the attempt to transfer a bulk of refugees from West Bengal to the neighbouring states, the attempts were resisted on both material and humanistic grounds. The Congress Government of the state wanted to justify its action on the ground that the refugee problem was a national problem and should be solved with the collective effort of all states. Saroj Chakrabarti who acted as the P.A. of the Chief Minister mentioned that Dr B. C. Roy had been persistently urging the Centre to fix quotas of refugees for rehabilitation in different provinces, as West Bengal alone could hardly absorb the huge inflow of the displaced persons. Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel, the Home Minister of the Government of India, convened a conference of the provincial premiers in the first week of April 1949 to discuss the issue. The Prime Minister pleaded with the Premiers to take the quotas of the displaced persons allotted by the Centre to their provinces for re-settlement. But Saroj Chakraborty admitted that these efforts did not become fruitful. In most cases the lands spared by the provinces for the accommodation of the refugees were unusable for cultivation or residence. The result was that the streams of the displaced persons sent to these areas found the situations unbearable and had to return to West Bengal.¹¹

¹¹ Chakrabarti Saroj. With Dr. B C Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record up to 1962)

Naturally the Communist Party sided with this unfortunate mass of people to stop further humiliation to them. Thus in 1957, 15000 deserters from Bettiah in Bihar, where they had been forcibly sent, took shelter in Howrah and Sealdah stations and *maidans* and succumbed to starvation and death. The ghastly incident raised an uproar from the Communist Party against the uncaring attitude of the Government. It set up a joint action committee with the likeminded political groups and exerted pressures upon the Government for organizing relief fund. In the end, with the assurance of a Government grant of a sum of Rs. 8 *lakhs* and 55 thousands and some other facilities for the refugees the deserters went back to Bettiah. But the political impact they had left upon the soil of West Bengal remained alive.¹²

The Bettiah incident also added a new dimension to the leftist politics as far as its role in exposing the regional interests of the people of West Bengal was concerned. Prafulla Chakrabarti in his work on the refugee movement noted an interesting interaction between the leftist leaders and Congress Chief Minister Bidharn Chandra Roy on the Bettiah issue. When the leftist leaders met Dr. Roy to plead for those unfortunate deserters, the Chief Minister expressed his inability to do anything substantial for the refugees as they had deserted the camp without prior notice. Then suddenly pointing a finger to the dazed leaders of the leftist parties he said that only they could save that suffering lot. He then outlined a blueprint for a joint movement of the leftist parties.¹³ The incident was a revealing one. The messianic role of the leftist forces that had already captured the popular imagination now got an appreciation even from their opponent party. By providing

¹² Sinha Tushar: *Maranajayi Sangrame Bastuhara*

¹³ Chakrabarti Prafulla: *The Marginal Men*, Kalyani, West Bengal, 1990

incentive and even patronage to his rival political forces in their struggle to protect the deprived and the disgruntled people of the state from the unsympathetic Central Government B. C. Roy virtually legitimized the political effort of the leftists to form a regional identity of the people of West Bengal.

The issue of rehabilitation, however, remained a chronic problem. On July 10, 1957, i.e., a few months after the second general election had been over, Bidhan Roy's Government presented a bill which was passed in the Legislative Council. This was the infamous Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorized Occupation of Land (Amendment) Bill 1957. The communists in the Opposition Party strongly opposed the bill. The unauthorized occupation took place primarily in unused Government lands and in the estates of the big landholders. In most cases the communists were the legitimizing and the leading forces behind these actions. The Government later legalized some of these forced possessions. But the process was incomplete and arbitrary. Naturally the communists vehemently resented the Government's attempt to destroy those settlements.¹⁴

Connected to it was the Dandakaranya Project (1958-59) in which the Central Government took measures to hurriedly rehabilitate the refugees in the virgin forests and unirrigated lands of Orissa. Here also the Communists blamed the Government's tendency to shake off the responsibility about those unfortunate people without harnessing the resources of the state for their cause. Their main point of accusation was that without exploring the possibility of human settlement in

¹⁴ Basu Jyoti. *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, Kolkata, 1991

the swampy lands of Sunderban and South 24 Parganas those displaced people were deliberately thrown outside the state. Anil Sinha who on behalf of the Communist Party played a leading role in the UCRC noted the insensibility of the Government towards the UCRC's alternative proposal for rehabilitation:

"The abolition of zamindari" was enacted in 1953. But it was not enforced by the Government with proper initiative. On the contrary, since 1955 the Government was clamouring about the paucity of land to rehabilitate the refugees. The UCRC placed before the Government "an alternative plan for the refugee rehabilitation". In this plan detailed information were given about the location and quantity of the fallow and uncultivable land in West Bengal. The industrial potentiality of the state too was pointed out. The Government could not refute this alternative plan. Yet, it was shouted that West Bengal had reached its saturation point regarding the vacant place for accommodating refugees. This was followed by the Dandakaranya Project."¹⁵

This policy was interpreted as a political conspiracy of the Congress Government. The Congress as a bourgeois political party was accused of safeguarding the interests of the landed magnates who even after the abolition of landlordism continued to hold land on a large scale through various legal tricks. Naturally the refugees who encroached upon these estates were considered as dangerous elements and the political agency which guided them too was branded as the enemy of the state. The election results of 1952 and 1957 confirmed the role of the refugees as potential vote bank of the Communist Party in West Bengal. The bulk removal of the refugees from West Bengal therefore, might as well be a political weapon to combat the

¹⁵ Sinha Anil: *Pashchimbange Udbastu Upanibesh*, pp. 23-24

communist threat in the state. Niranjan Sengupta¹⁶ who as an M.L.A. of the CPI had been defending the cause of the refugees in the Legislative Assembly exposed this political calculation of the government:

“Some of the refugees occupied land from the rich landowners and made it habitable. But the Government for the sake of the landowners had designed to uproot them and make them refugees once again. ...It proves the failure of the Government policy. We have seen that those unfortunate fellows are vehemently protesting against this Government policy. The experience of the last election was a clear evidence of their anti-Government political ideas. That is why the Government has planned to uproot them and teach them a lesson. But I am sure that this calculation will misfire.”¹⁷

In other words, the refugee question was brought into the vortex of the politics of class. The enthusiastic response of the people to this way of politics is proved by a letter of appeal written from a local refugee leader to a communist activist:

“A few poor families like us who had been uprooted from East Bengal due to the partition relied on the promises of our national leaders and sought refuge in the Indian soil. By hard toil and whatever nominal resource they had, the members of these families purchased bushy land in Collegepara, Devinagar, Goalpara and such places, a few miles away from Raiganj town, and made them usable for habitation. Now this is our only source of sustenance. But unfortunately the Government of West Bengal has planned to set up the head office of West Dinajpur District at Raygonj. This has posed a new threat of displacement to two hundred families like ours and also another seven or eight hundred families who have purchased land but could not have as yet built up houses there. Unfortunately the Government's Department of Rehabilitation has showed little concern for us.

¹⁶ Nirnanjan Sengupta became the Refugee and Rehabilitation minister under the two UF Governments during 1967-69.

¹⁷ Debate on Refugee Relief: speech delivered by Niranjan Sengupta
Eighteenth Session of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. November-December, 1957

Collected from the West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings

...The district plan of the Government seems to have a clear design behind it. It has spared the houses of the big merchants and the Congressmen, adjacent to the jail campus and the land which the Government had occupied earlier. On the contrary, it has targeted the two hundred huts of those poor fellows. ...So, out of sheer desperation we appeal to you as a person as well as to your party to render active help to us to stop the eviction.

...We make this appeal with the genuineness of our belief in the sincerity of your party to make relentless struggle for the refugees. We should be ever grateful to you if you kindly take up our case and save us from the evil design of the Government.”¹⁸

The communists found another opportunity to mobilize the masses in view of the intense food crisis. After the partition the food deficit in West Bengal assumed serious proportions. The huge and constant flow of refugees, which upset the demographic balance, and the rampant stockholding that created artificial scarcity made the situation unbearable for the common masses.

The discriminatory policy of the Central Government further aggravated the problem. This was an issue to which the Communist Party began to draw the attention of the people ever since independence. Even the State Congress could not ignore the issue altogether. B. C. Roy in a letter, written on December 1, 1949, to Nehru meticulously pointed out the areas where West Bengal became a victim of the discriminatory fiscal policy of the Central Government. Allocation of income tax was one such area. The Chief Minister wrote:

“...when Bengal was partitioned, West Bengal started with a deficit balance of 2 and ½ *crores* still unpaid. We were badly treated by a Centre which took away part of our share of income-tax moiety to other provinces

¹⁸ A letter (dated 19.1.58) written to Ambika Chakrabarti, who was the General Secretary of the UCRC, by Nalini Mohun Gun, Secretary, Goalpara, *Udbastu Raksha Samiti*, Collegepara, Debinagar, Raiganj
Collected from I. B Records-File No. 165z/24, Sub: Ambika Chakrabarti

and appropriated the jute tax-share for themselves. The fact remains however that without previous intimation to us we were informed in March 1948 that our share of the income tax receipts has been reduced from 20% to 12% or in other words, our share which was Rs/ 6 *crores* annually was reduced to Rs/ 3 and $\frac{1}{2}$ *crores*. The remaining 2 and $\frac{1}{2}$ *crores* were distributed to other provinces. See how iniquitous this new arrangement proves to be: Bombay with a population of 21 millions received an enhanced share from 20 to 21% whereas West Bengal with the same population or perhaps a little more got her share reduced from 20% to 12%. And yet West Bengal and Bombay contributed almost the same amounts towards the Income-tax Pool. The reason given is ostensibly the reduction in size of Bengal, but the fact is that the portion of Bengal formed into East Bengal contributed only 5 per cent of the total Income Tax collection of undivided Bengal. Calcutta and the industrial area have contributed mostly in the past; they remained with us and, therefore, the income tax figure has also practically remained the same even after the partition. So, I do not know what logic or principle of equity brought about the new allocation. The result has been that our finances were badly crippled. I do not want to press this parochial approach but we were forced by circumstances to do so.”¹⁹

So, the financial curtailment on the ground of reduction in the size of the state was termed as unjustified. On the other hand, the Chief Minister did not forget to mention the additional financial responsibilities imposed upon the state after the partition. The huge expense for the maintenance of the border police and the refugees, which fell upon the Government of West Bengal after the partition, was hardly shared by the other provinces as a national burden. In this condition the reduction in the share of national income severely hurt the financial stability of the state.

¹⁹ Collected from Chakrabarti Saroj: *With Dr. B. C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record up to 1962)*, p. 141

Jyoti Basu in his memoirs recalled an occasion of the Congress-left agreement on the issue of discrimination of the Centre:

"On March 1958, ...Chief Minister Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy in his budget speech...criticized the attitude of the Central Government. Very often he raised his voice against the discriminatory policy of the Centre and emphatically demanded the legitimate rights of the state. The ruling party in Delhi was the Congress and Dr. Roy was a member of the top-most committee of that party. But this apparently contradictory positions cannot minimize his role in favour of his state."²⁰

Such points of agreement, however, did not remove the tension and enmity in the relations between the ruling Congress in the state and its leftist opposition. Jyoti Basu continued:

"I applauded this budget speech of Dr. Roy.

...But the proposal which I made suggesting a deputation of all parties of the state to the Central Government, was turned down by the Congress by virtue of majority. Though in opposition, we were ready to cooperate with the State Government to secure our legitimate rights from the Centre. But the Congress Government in our state did not accept it."²¹

The personal rapport between the top ranking leaders of the Congress and the left, the common sense of regional identity was not translated into a joint political action. The ideology of revolution, though unimplemented, retarded the political union of the 'capitalist' and the 'communist' parties.

Naturally the communists proceeded with their own way of mass mobilization. Popular discontent and occasional outburst on the issue of insufficient supply of food had almost been a regular affair since independence. Food problem was

²⁰ Basu Jyoti: *Jatadur Mane Pare* (As Far As I Remember), Kolkata, 1998, pp. 166-167

²¹ Ibid. pp. 168-169

neither a new issue nor a sectional issue. It made a glaring presence during the famine of 1943 but it inflicted pain on the people throughout the period. Besides, it was a problem that affected different sections of the population. It was easier to organize a general movement on this issue. Apart from conducting relief work and other welfare measures the Communist Party, however, initially could not make any major political mobilization partly because of its lack of organizational strength and partly because of any clear policy of the party on the issue. The party could not as yet develop any positive correlation between its class politics and welfare activities on occasions of food crisis. The result was, as a report of the West Bengal State Committee of the Communist Party admitted, that as early as 1952 the Provincial Committee instructed its cadres to make mass mobilization on the issue of food crisis. But no concrete guideline was set for it. However, the report of the State Committee noted about the spontaneous initiative by the local committees at places like 24 Parganas for mobilization. In 1958-59 also when the party fumbled, the Krishak Sabha at its own initiative launched movements in different districts. Like in the refugee front, on the issue of food crisis also the Communist Party had to face a trial of its ideologies. The sectarian formulation of class struggle had to be discarded in favour of a broad platform for all the struggling masses to justify the image of the party as a people's party. Not only the party had to take control of the spill-over by its own party ranks but it also had to sustain its leadership in the leftist politics because already the other left forces like the RSP, the Forward Bloc had been united on the food issue. The Communist Party, however, took the challenge. The communists along with the other opposition parties constituted The Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) in 1958. It demanded the

Governmental regulation to control the prices of foodstuff and ensure their availability, and launched popular action to destroy the network of the hoarders and racketeers. Finally the entire programme was put in a political package to expose the oppressive and exploitative nature of the Congress rule.²²

In 1959, the left opposition mobilized the refugees, petty bourgeoisie, working class and also a number of peasants who flocked around the city to organize a mass movement. The movement began on August 20. Rally, civil disobedience, mass demonstration disrupted normal life not only in Calcutta but also in Howrah, Burdwan, Nadia, Purulia, Murshidabad, Hooghly, Jalpaiguri. Students were also involved. It was a violent movement. Police stations were burnt. There were occasional clashes between policemen and the crowd. A strike was organized on September 3, at the call of the PIFRC and in commemoration of the death by police attack during that strike Martyr's Day was observed on September 8. Finally the movement subsided with the intervention of the Central Government which sent a relief of rice and wheat and thus temporarily put a check on the rising tide of the price of food grains.

However, the political impact of the communist leadership upon popular minds survived. Biplab Dasgupta who later became a member of the CPI(M)'s Central Committee and edited the party's periodical *Nandan* was a young participant in the

²² Khadya Andolan Samparke Bharater Communist Party, Pashchimbanga Rajya Committer Paryalochona (A Survey of The Food Movement by West Bengal State Committee of The Communist Party of India), May 8, 1953 – Collected from Das Suranjan and Bandyopadhyay Premansukumar ed.: *Food Movement of 1959 – Documenting A Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, Kolkata, 2004 & Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishaksabhar Itihas*, Kolkata, 1990

food movement. Pointing out the broader objective which the food movement could achieve going beyond its immediate focus on the issue of non-availability of food grains he wrote:

“Food movement and mass uprisings on other issues was a regular phenomenon throughout the decade of 1950. ... In 1958-59, these movements some of which assumed alarming proportion, had a twofold objective:

a) They aimed at protecting the crops. The peasants who produced grains with hard toil had no guarantee of enjoying the harvest which was often forcibly appropriated by *zamindars* or *jotedars*. So, the protection of crops was a major issue of the peasant movements and this inflicted sacrifice of many lives upon the peasants by the onslaught of the zamindars’ retinue.

b) The second set of movements was purely food movements which succeeded in effecting a unity between towns and villages. The urban people wanted to lower the price of foodgrains. The peasants in rural society, on the other hand, demanded fair price for their products. Both of these ambitions, though apparently contradictory, could be fulfilled by removing the middlemen. If the hoarders, moneylenders and all sorts of intermediaries could be excluded from the scene, and the primary producers of villages could make direct contact with the urban customers, the people of urban areas could procure food at a cheap rate by paying fair price to the rural producers. The intermediaries create the compulsion for the peasants to sell foodgrains at a lower price and the urban people to purchase the same items at an exorbitant rate. So, if the profit-making business of the intermediaries could be stopped, this would be beneficial for both the producers and the consumers.”²³

Thus the food movement created a common space between the urban and rural sectors. This assessment was corroborated by a letter from a supporter of the Communist Party – Jiban Dey – to Niranjan Sengupta:

“These strikes and food movement have been conspicuous in their ability to create a rupture in the middle class support base of the Congress. On the contrary, our supporters from the middle classes are increasing in

²³ Dasgupta Biplab: *Smritir Rekha 1959* (1959: Down The Memory Lane)
 Das Suranjan and Bandyopadhyay Premansukumar ed.: *Food Movement of 1959 – Documenting A Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, pp. 136-137

number. The experience is the same as far as the refugees are concerned. The key to our success is that, while the Congress has recourse to scandalizing us, our comrades have earnestly endeavoured to make our political agenda convincing to the people. Our success has further marginalized the Congress.”²⁴

The author of the letter was jubilant about the fact that the people were appreciating the ideological content of the political opposition of the communists to the Congress. The jubilation, on the contrary, turned into anxiety in the report of a pro-Congress newspaper which too could not deny the failure of the Congress Government to cope with the seething discontent of the people and the justification of the leftist policy:

“No conscientious man can be insensitive to the horrible condition of the City of Calcutta. It is under twofold pressure of popular riots and governmental repression. Public life has lost its normal rhythm. The poor are the worst sufferers, as it is becoming extremely difficult for them to earn their livelihood. The protest against the high price of the essential commodities has taken its toll in lives. Life is at stake. The women and the ailing people too are not spared. Business is paralysed. The communication system is facing total collapse. Roads are unsafe, especially at night.

Nowadays destruction has become a craze. But how can we deny the numerous incidents of self-sacrifice by the same masses during our struggle for national liberation between 1905 and 1942? So, we must ponder over this change of attitude, such ghastly incident as the popular attack on six police stations of the city during a national regime. We now require a self-criticism to find out the sins of our government as well as of our countrymen, and to recover our state and society from total disarray.

Let us consider the whole thing. The statesmen of both the leftist and the Congress parties as well as the ordinary men of the state must think together. Animosity, conflict and bloodshed would only plunge us into a civil war. The Government should change its food policy, take the suggestions

²⁴ A letter from Jiban Dey, Tufanganj, to Niranjan Sengupta, dated November 19, 1956

I.B.Records-File No: 374z/23, Subject: Correspondence and Letters of Niranjan Sengupta

of the leftist leaders and come to an amicable settlement. Why do not we find the Congress leaders to take initiative amidst such a crisis of our beloved city? Is it desirable that the police and the mob should take control of the situation? Our Prime Minister Pandit Nehru is still our national leader. Should he remain at the distant capital and judge the misfortune of this great historical city only through a few official reports? Should not he visit the city and prescribe remedy to its deep-rooted problems by his own understanding? You cannot produce crops by hurling bombs. Nor can you provide food to hungry people through firing upon them. The solution can be sought only through peaceful arbitration and through a constructive method. We have repeatedly experienced that whenever people become turbulent, the Government too resorts to violence to restore peace and order. Both of these should be ended. Both the Central and the State Governments should rethink their policies, and by releasing the leftist leaders from jail should discuss with them to find a peaceful solution.”²⁵

Thus the food movement united towns with villages, brought the intellectuals and the primary producers on a common platform of struggle, and set before them a common political agenda of anti-Congress action. It was in this way that the alternative world of the communist regime was built up in popular imagination.

Election: A Discourse of Populist Alternative

The Elections of 1957 was faced by the Communist Party with the projection of this idea of alternative power structure. The alternative structure was sought to be achieved within the existing parliamentary system; though the communists earnestly believed that the substantial enlargement of democratic rights needed continuous popular movements. Sudhangshu Dasgupta

²⁵ *Dhusaha Kalikata* (Intolerable Kolkata) (*Yugantar*, Editorial, September 3, 1959)

who held an important position in the party and was associated with the party's newspaper *Swadhinata* revealed this electoral strategy of the party:

"Under these circumstances the announcement for a general election was made in 1957. The State Committee of the party in its election manifesto upheld the idea of an alternative government to the Congress regime. Obviously at that moment the Communist Party was not in a position to defeat the Congress in electoral contest and to establish an alternative regime. Yet, we consciously raised this slogan to create a popular awareness about this vision. The propaganda came into reality in 1967 with the establishment of the United Front Government. Ten years later, the formation of the Left Front Government in 1977 further consolidated the basis of such programme."²⁶

However, in 1957 too, the election results were promising.²⁷ In West Bengal State Assembly the representation of the left opposition was raised from 57 to 80. The CPI alone won 46 seats. Compared to the achievements of the first election, the party's position became definitely steady and strong in the parliamentary sphere. The real significance of the Elections of 1957, however, lay elsewhere. Kerala emerged as the first state in India where the leftist coalition captured power. This success encouraged the members of the Communist Party, in its all shades of opinion, to view the possibility of transition to socialism through parliamentary means. The creation of a ring of federated states vis-à-vis the present uneven balance of power in Centre-state relations appeared to be a tangible reality.

²⁶ Dasgupta Sudhangshu: *Andaman Jail The Communist Party* (From Andaman Jail to The Communist Party), Kolkata, 1994, p 138

²⁷ *Election Results of West Bengal-Statistics and Analysis*, published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee

But the prospect did not materialize. The growing dissension of the dominant social forces of landlords and businessmen with the newly installed Left Front Government on the issue of land reforms and the illegitimate intervention of the Central Government abruptly cut short the life of the communist regime in Kerala in July 1959.²⁸ This experience once again made the radical section of the communists sceptical about the effectiveness of parliamentary means to implement the communist programme without bringing a structural change.

The party line again began to be questioned by a group of party members. In a draft programme for discussion placed before the sixth party Congress at Vijaywada in 1961, B. Gurmukh Singh commented:

“Reaching Palghat we appreciated the Plans of the Government, supported the ‘progressive policies’ and gave slogan to change direction, of the reactionary and anti-people policies of the Government. Here we again slipped in the mud of reformism, declaring ourselves as Party of the Opposition, and leaving our class position as Party of the working class. Class viewpoint was altogether missing from our analysis of the Government policies. The anti-feudal, anti imperialist tasks of the movement were buried deep in Palghat.”

²⁸ The formation of a communist ministry in Kerala by the Assembly Elections in 1957 launched an interesting experiment in the politics of that state and set an example for the whole country. But the communist government, while implementing its socialist type of programme in the field of labour, education and administration, faced continuous opposition from certain social groups who were in privileged positions, and the bureaucrats who sustained the interests of those groups in administration. The most serious divergence of opinion took place on the issue of reallocation of land among the landless and poor peasants. These controversies and dissensions spelt a real danger for the Government of Kerala, when the provincial groups of vested interests formed a nexus with the Central Government, and the latter dissolved the communist ministry and imposed the President's rule in the state in July 1959. (*Communism in Kerala* : T. J. Nossiter)

He did not disapprove of the necessity and prospect of parliamentary methods and peaceful means for transition of power. But he warned against any complacency about or blind reliance on those lines of action which could be made ineffective by the bourgeois state machine and its repressive apparatus.

"As for the means and methods", he writes, "peaceful or otherwise, to a certain extent it depends on the organised strength of the working class and peasantry, the level of their class consciousness and the influence they wield over the other strata of society. But still much it depends on the attitude of the ruling class.

Whether it is ready to submit and surrender to the will of the people. In those circumstances while making serious efforts sincerely for peaceful transformation, we must be prepared to face the situation otherwise."²⁹

Even in the Palghat Congress caution was voiced against the overestimation of the anti-imperialist spirit of the bourgeois nationalist government. In a report to the fourth party congress it was warned:

"...it would be a profound mistake to consider that the sharpening of the conflict between imperialism and Indian Government, of the conflict between feudalism and the needs of bourgeois development and the attempt of the bourgeoisie to strengthen its position in this conflict, have already led to or can automatically lead to the internal policies of the Government becoming popular, democratic and wholly progressive. The bourgeoisie seeks to strengthen its position not merely in relation to imperialism and feudalism, but also in relation to the popular masses. It seeks to resolve its conflict with imperialism and feudalism at the cost of the people."³⁰

²⁹ Draft Programme for discussion placed before the sixth Congress of the Party held at Vijaywada in April 7-16, 1961

Documents of the Communist Movement in India Vol.-VIII, p. 894

³⁰ Report to the Fourth Party Congress

Placed by the Central Committee of the CPI for discussion by the Delegates of the Party Congress held at Palghat from 19-29 April, 1956

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India* Vol.-VII, pp. 615-616

However, the urge for militancy did not upset the calculations of the electoral politics. A secret police report of a meeting of the trade union front of the communists highlighted this ambivalence role of the party:

“Jyoti Basu addressed the meeting to ring out the policy to be followed by the party in the trade union movements in the coming months. He particularly mentioned about the Teachers’ movement and bonus agitation in Tram, Burn & Co, Howrah and other industrial concerns. He said that the party would always try to avoid a major show-down in any front. Attempts should always be made to release whatever concessions possible at minimum toil and sacrifice. The agitational approach should go side by side with efforts for a negotiated settlement. There might be threats for strike where necessary or even preparations for strike might be kept going but that should not stand in the way of negotiations for peaceful settlement. Through this process the party would be able to win the sympathy of the workers on the one hand and on the other this will help giving no quarter to the anti-CPI elements to discredit the party on the eve of the elections and brand it as a party always out to create chaos and disorder.”³¹

Reflections on Social Issues

(i) On Religion and Communal Questions

The compromise was also made on social issues. Communism not only envisaged an alternative world order in areas of production and power relations but also deconsecrated all ideas of divinity and supernatural. Just as the state was characterized as an instrument of exploitation, so religion too, according to it, was an agency for legitimizing that exploitation.

³¹ Report of a meeting of the Trade Union front in Calcutta D.C. Office of the party on 17.09.61

So, the communists not only threatened the vested interests of the class enemies but also attacked a value system which had been held in high esteem by the exploited classes. This brought the emotional acceptability of communism under a question mark. Manikuntala Sen, in her memoirs, noted the reaction of one of her close relatives and guardians at her initiation into communism. When she was departing from her village home for higher studies in Calcutta and to join the city unit of the Communist Party that person lamented:

"I am sure that she will never come back. What agonizes me most is that she has lost her faith in religion."³²

While working among the masses as a party activist, Manikuntala Sen had a similar experience. She herself too became confused and at her mature age felt that this approach was based on a misreading of the situation on the ground. She wrote:

"While learning Marxist literature in the study circle of our hostel, I felt really irritated and upset. Why on the earth should communism quarrel with God? Even now I cannot control my temper, when I remember such useless propaganda. I think the essence of communism lies in its economic programme, in its idea of a new state and society under the proletarian leadership; in its promise to ensure social justice, human rights, women's emancipation and child welfare. Throughout my political career I spread this message of communism. ... Since at the first step of propaganda we targeted the religious belief we whipped at the most sensitive part of the popular minds and consequently alienated them. Now at this mature age I regret for those childish actions. No doubt, had we been more sensible, we could not have been branded by our opponents as irreligious, anti-social guys."³³

³² Sen Manikuntala: *Sediner Katha*, p. 34

³³ Ibid. p. 40

It seems that in a piquant mood of self-criticism Manikuntala Sen was dwelling upon the possibility of how the communists could be represented before the ordinary public as an irreligious lot with all its alienating repercussions. That there was some substance in the fear of Manikuntala Sen was revealed in a comment of Chief Minister B. C. Roy. In July 1956 in course of a discussion with two Soviet leaders, Bulganin and Khrushchev, during their visit to Calcutta Dr. Roy remarked:

“I am a great believer of God” and “...as long as the people of Bengal and India believe that there is some supernatural power there can be no communism”.³⁴

But neither the fear of Manikuntala Sen nor the expectation of Dr B. C. Roy became a reality. The communist leaders could tactfully avoid hurting popular emotion without discarding the revolutionary world view. Haradhan Ray, a party activist, had a long experience of working among the mining workers and other factory labourers in Asansol. During an election campaign in 1962 in a village with predominantly Muslim population he was countered by a rich and influential Muslim leader of the locality on the ground of irreligiosity:

“During the meeting Nurul Huda threw a question, ‘I have nothing to say against your cadres. You are honest, benevolent, self-sacrificing. But I am worried about one thing. Do you have faith in religion?’ I got puzzled for a moment. Had I expressed my irreligiosity the situation would immediately take a turn in favour of Mr. Huda. This was actually his plan. The Muslims in general are very sensitive about religious issues. Some of them are even fanatics. So, any casual response would easily provoke the Muslims to separate themselves from us.”

³⁴ Chakrabarti Saroj: *With Dr. B. C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record up to 1962)*, p. 324

The way through which that communist activist tackled this critical situation proved the party's disposition on the sensitive social issues. He replied:

"...I am a communist. It does not matter whether I am personally a non-believer. But it is important to note that we do not have any grudge against large masses of people who practise religion. We are neither communal nor curtail freedom of religion. Rather we respect popular belief. However, we oppose any attempt to use religion as an instrument of exploitation. We believe neither in religion nor in caste but in humanism, and love mankind."³⁵

It was a tricky answer. On the one hand, it tried to maintain a balance between the party's theoretical premise and its practical feasibility in a given situation. On the other hand, it virtually reiterated the constitutional norm of non-communal approach in the multi-religious structure of Indian nation. Thus instead of alienating the party from popular emotion it rather tended to fit the party into the nationalist paradigm.

(ii) Caste and Communism

While the communal challenge was combated by a functional ideology, another sensitive social issue which the communists encountered in course of their popular mobilization was caste prejudice. The caste identity in Indian society not only dominated the emotional world of the people but also was very often integrally connected with the economic status of the population and, therefore, could be a major determinant in the political struggle. This kind of social pattern could act both in favour of as well as against the process of political mobilization undertaken by the communists. In setting the behavioural pattern

³⁵ Ray Haradhan: *Agnigarbha Dinguli*, pp 81-82

of the community the caste consideration could easily override the idea of class struggle cherished by the communists. On the other hand, if the communists could channelize the caste consolidation along class lines a long-standing social bond could as well be a potential source of political solidarity in tune with the spirit of class struggle.

In states like Kerala and Bihar the Communist Party took a few steps in this direction. In Kerala, for example, the rising elite of the major backward community, the *Ezhavas*-featured prominently in the politics of the state in the twentieth century and quite naturally was incorporated into the forum of the Communist Party. This process of incorporation was successful because the Communist Party in Kerala adhered to the movement of self-reliance of the marginal castes organized by the caste based social organization SNDP.

Similarly in Bihar, the communists along with some nationalist elements played a major role in arousing peasant militancy to strike at the feudal order in agrarian life. But in a society where caste was the main parameter of defining landownership and landlessness no political mobilization could take place ignoring the social identity of an economic class. Any agrarian struggle, even when it was led by the communists, by virtue of its social composition assumed the form of caste conflict. Agrarian uprising tended to cause social inversion by attacking the upper caste domination in landownership.

However, caste politics never blurred the class position of the communists. Apart from the natural manifestation of the underlying caste tension within the society, there was hardly any conscious mobilization along caste lines by the communists.

The policies and propaganda of the communists were unambiguously secular.³⁶ In other words, the Communist Party did not allow the vigour of its class struggle to be diluted by any social denominator. Rather the party expected that the consciousness of a communist worldview would rather weaken the caste concept and caste practices.

The expectation was partially fulfilled in some places of Andhra where the caste rules set the structure of rural society. Rahul Sankrityayan, a philosopher with socialist inclination visited the villages of Andhra. He was amazed at the miraculous impact of communism on the psyche of the villagers. He noted the experience of his visit in a village called Daolur:

“32 among the 40 members of the Communist Party (at Daolour) are untouchable and wage-earners. I am, however, using the term ‘untouchable’, only because my readers are familiar with this term. But this does not describe the actual condition of those low caste labourers. Neither they themselves have any sense of lowliness nor the people of other communities humiliate them. The learning of communism and the activities as communist cadres have generated a sense of self-respect among them. Though their poverty has not been fully eradicated, it has certainly been reduced.

...How did this change take place? Those untouchable people had been initiated into Christianity. They enjoyed entry to the church. A clergyman also lived in the village. This European clergyman, however, was as alien to those newly converted Christians as the high caste Hindus. He had no sympathy for those unfortunate labourers and showed little concern about their struggle against the economic exploitation by the Hindu capitalists, moneylenders and the Government.

³⁶ i) Nossiter T. J.: *Communism in Kerala*

ii) Jha Usha. *Land, Labour and Power (Agrarian Crisis and the State in Bihar – 1937-52)*, Delhi, 2003

...The scene began to change since 1936 at the initiative of Surya Narayan Rao (*Kamma*). He had originally been a supporter of the Congress and also presided over the party at the local level. But during his imprisonment at Rajmahendri he came into contact with Comrade Ramlingaiya and was initiated into communism. After his release Suryanarayan launched a campaign among the village labourers. Initially, however, there was hardly any positive response. Rather the clergyman launched a counter-campaign, 'They are atheist and non-believer. Don't listen to them.' ...Failed and frustrated, Suryanarayan tried an alternative. He himself learnt the Bible, highlighted those portions of the Holy Script that had an anti-rich spirit and propagated them among the people. After the effort of nearly one year a few labourers gradually developed some interest. It was 1937. The workers demanded the increase of their wage from two *kunke* (a unit of measurement of dry rice) to two and a half. The landowners did not comply with their demand. Five hundred workers, including both male and female, refused to work in agrarian fields. Suryanarayan and his comrades launched an intensive campaign not only in Daolour but also in the neighbouring regions. The response was really impressive. Workers of nearly fourteen villages joined the strike. ...After three days a settlement was made. The labourers managed to fix their wage at three *kunke* which surpassed their proposed increase up to two and a half. This was the turning point. The labourers were fully convinced of the necessity of association to protect their interests. The betterment of lifestyle through the increase of wage seemed to be a more concrete achievement than the prospect of attaining happiness after the end of life. No wonder, the labourers increasingly relied on the union, which mobilized their strength and which made this success possible."³⁷

In other words, both religion and caste lost their ideological ground to determine the social destiny of man.

In West Bengal too, the silence of the Communist Party on the caste question can be explained by the logic of the ideology of class upheld by the party. Of course, principally the

³⁷ Sankrityayan Rahul, translated by Tapati Chaudhuri, Debikana Guha, Prabir Sinha Roy: *Amar Jibanyatra* (My Lifestyle) (Vol III), Kolkata, 1994, pp 133-135

Communist Party was opposed to all sorts of caste discrimination. But the party did not consider it essential to deal with it as a separate issue for popular movement. Rather in the projected political revolution of the communists that promised to create an egalitarian society such a divisive and exploitative social force was expected to be automatically wiped out. On various occasions of popular mobilization in both rural and urban fronts such as the *tebhaga* movement or the refugee movement, the communists by striking the economic basis of conflict could make the casteist dimension of the disposition of wealth and influence irrelevant in their scheme of politics. In other words, according to the communist ideology, the socialist system was the only solution to all sorts of social and economic discrimination and exploitation.

(iii) Communism and Women

Nowhere was this holistic attitude of the Communist Party more clear than in its response to the women's question. This was a critical issue which affected the party's activities in several ways. The Communist Party within a few years after its formation attracted a large number of women from different age groups and with different social, economic and educational background. They not only provided social sustenance to the menfolk in a long-standing political battle but they themselves also became partners to it and were actually involved in politics. The party had a separate women forum called *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti* (MARS).

This enthusiastic participation of the women raised a number of points. On the one hand, everywhere the female activists of the party had to face slanderous campaigns by the opposition parties. Spread of filthy stories about the communist girls and even physical assault on them were not unknown. Attacks on the communist women went to such a pass that

persons like Rani Mahalanobis, Sarojini Naidu, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who did not believe in the ideology of the communists but were conscientious figures in politics and society, made public statements to stop such abusive campaigns and allow the communist women to work freely.³⁸ So, it was essential for the party also to combat those negative campaigns and to present an image of its members that would fit into the paradigm of social values and morality.

On the other hand, since the women constituted a sizeable section of the party ranks certain questions regarding the status and the rights of the women in society came to the forefront. The issues became all the more important because the MARS acted like a general women organization. Though the communist women held the political leadership of this association, women of all classes and social strata, irrespective of their political and religious beliefs joined here. Among those organizations associated with the MARS were the Congress *Mahila Samiti*, the All India Women's Conference and the Young Women's Christian Association. So, apart from acting as the women wing of a political party the MARS could become a wide platform for the discriminated and exploited women.³⁹ Naturally the party's stand about women's issues had to be clear and the party also needed to outline a programme before its women front.

Renu Chakrabartty who was a leading figure in the party's women front once asked P. Sundarayya, the General Secretary

³⁸ Chakravatty Renu: *Communists in Indian Women's Movement (1940-1950)*, New Delhi, 1980

³⁹ Mukherjee Kanak: *Women's Emancipation Movement in India – A Marxist View*, Kolkata, 1989

of the Communist Party, for suggestions about the aims and activities of the women's organization. The suggestions which he made were the following:

a) The women cadres should work among trade unions, kisan sabhas and student movements to mobilize both men and women on their immediate pressing economic and political demands. This would help to draw in more women into those organizations.

b) Special women's committees should be set up in trade unions and kisan sabhas to carry on more effective work among women. These committees should perform their assignments in women's front along with their general responsibilities as parts of trade unions and kisan sabhas.

c) The agitation and campaign for the Hindu Code Bill, abolition of child marriage, equal rights of inheritance, divorce, stop of wife beating, etc. should be taken up by the women's organizations, trade unions and kisan sabhas as features of democratic demands. The special role of the women in those campaigns were undeniable. But those campaigns were not the sole responsibility or even the main responsibility of women and their special organizations. A powerful campaign by all democratic organizations is necessary.

The implications of the suggestions are clear. The party recognized the necessity of separate women's forum in each of its popular wings. To mobilize the women for a particular political programme the foremost need was to understand the world of women and for this, special and separate treatment of them was necessary. But the party was careful so that this women's movement should not go beyond the corpus of the

party's general political programme and acquire an autonomous character. The women's issues, if necessary, should be included in the party's political agenda and a general campaign would be made for them. The women, on the other hand, were expected to respond to the general call of the society without concentrating on their sectarian issues. Hence Sundarayya's message to the party's women front was that:

"Let us not be under any illusion that the special evils under which women are suffering can be remedied by campaigning for legislation against them, without radical social transformation and the economic upliftment of women. If you concentrate on these evils, it will be starting at the wrong end. Concentrate on basic problems while at the same time gradually developing campaigns for abolishing these evils."⁴⁰

Renu Chakravartty herself in her reminiscences about the communist led women's movement in India expressed the essence of the movement in the following manner:

"This was the root of the perception, that the real emancipation of women could be achieved only in a society where exploitation for profit and greed ends and women are no longer looked upon as the property and chattel of men. To bring about such a socio-economic transformation a mass movement was needed. Working class women, peasant women, agricultural labouring women, the urban poor – all these forming the bulk of the women population in our country had to be brought out from the deadening paralysis of feudal oppression and exploitation stretching over centuries.

...Hence in our country, the struggle for women's emancipation had a political and economic importance, if even the social demands of women had to be fulfilled. It was a fight against both feudal and capitalist exploitation, as well as fight against foreign rule in India and against forces of reaction in the world at large. If the happiness and dignity of women were to be won and the security of the life of their children and their families

⁴⁰ A letter from P. Sundarayya to the Politburo and comrade Renu (23. 09. 52)
CPI Women Front-52, S. B. Records

were to be ensured, they must win this struggle. Women's liberation could not take place or be separated from the struggle of the toiling people for a better life. This understanding brought me into the communist movement and this is what was imparted to me and to communist women by the Communist Party."⁴¹

The same experience was reiterated by Kanak Mukherjee, a comrade to Renu Chakravartty in the women's front. Later these two ladies joined in two different camps of communism. But their appreciation of the women question as a part of the general revolutionary programme of the party remained as a common experience. Kanak Mukherjee wrote:

"...the women's movement was given a revolutionary basis of along with the class struggles of the workers, peasants, and other toiling masses of the people. The mainstream of the movement of the oppressed people for their democratic rights was usually directed against the Congress government representing the bourgeois-landlord classes. It was gradually obvious that the main hurdle in the progress of the country were the policies and the activities of the ruling classes. People began to realise that the central government of the Congress is responsible for adopting anti-people policies which make the rich richer and the poor poorer and increase the degree of oppression of the poor more and more. The class struggle sharpened. ... Women also began to realise that unless class exploitation is ended, unless there is a radical change in the social system, equal rights for women cannot be established. Real equality between men and women cannot be realised unless women are economically independent and unless they participate in the socially productive work.

...the democratic women's movement in India today has to be anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and anti-monopoly in nature. It has to work in line with the democratic movement of the people and class struggles of the toiling masses even as women are doubly exploited."⁴²

⁴¹ Chakravartty Renu. *Communists in Indian Women's Movement (1940-1950)*, p. 7

⁴² Mukherjee Kanak. *Women's Emancipation Movement in India – A Marxist View*, p. 106

Just as on other issues that could create a division within the society and make some sections subject to exploitation, in women's question also the party made a twofold approach. It did not ignore the pressing problems and suggested some immediate relief. But the permanent solution was assured only after a wholesome change in social structure through a political revolution. Thus the party could avoid the criticism of being indifferent to social questions. At the same time, by identifying a common enemy for all the disgruntled sections of the society the party could fulfil its political ambition to create a democratic front for organizing a socialist revolution.

(iv) Forming a Social Identity

Yet, the social acceptability of the Communist Party was not likely to be ensured by political ideology alone. It was necessary to build up a socially acceptable image of the communists. The anti-establishment mood of the communists which had not only a political connotation but also went against some of the long-standing social values and institutions, made them vulnerable to the social criticism of the opposition parties in politics. So, it was necessary for the communists to project before the people a constructive alternative to justify their subversive activities. Hence along with political campaign the cultivation of a social code too became a part of the communist movement. Muzaffar Ahmad, for example, who was a founder figure of the Communist Party in Bengal and later joined the CPI(M) tried untiringly to set a model of a 'communist character'. Sumanta Heera, a party cadre, in his reminiscences about '*kakababu*' ('uncle' by which Muzaffar Ahmad was

generally addressed by his party comrades) narrated one of his experiences:

"He showed respect to everyone. ... Throughout his life he addressed only a few persons informally. He made this formal behaviour consciously. In our country the rich and the middle class people never treat the poor toiling masses, not even their senior members, respectfully. But the 'uncle' was an exception. He felt sorry at this attitude. The majority of the members of the Communist Party came from the middle class. The 'uncle' made an earnest effort to make all the newcomers in the party sensitive to this issue. Thus through his own belief and practice he set a model of a communist code of conduct."

He recalled another incident which also revealed the same spirit:

"The 'uncle' never enjoyed any privilege. Kanai cooked once a day. The food was warmed up twice, once at noon and the other at night before dinner. During the excessively hot summer days very often the food became stale. Comrade B. T. Ranadive and Comrade P. Sundarayya noticed it and decided to purchase a small refrigerator for the 'uncle'. Comrade P. Sundarayya politely gave the proposal to the 'uncle'. But he instantly refused. Once during his visit to Bombay the 'uncle' stayed at Comrade Dange's quarter. He found a big jar of odicolougne in the bathroom. The 'uncle' felt curious. Comrade Dange replied that this made him fresh after bath. The 'uncle' was amused at this lifestyle of a proletariat leader."⁴³

Samir Dasgupta, recollecting the early phases of his party career, noted that he not only had to learn the Marxist literature but also had to follow a code of conduct. He wrote:

"I cherish an incident in my memory. I had been living in Kareya Road with the 'uncle' since 1953. Very often I went to cinema halls at the show of 8.30 or 9 p.m. This was the only time that I could afford for that

⁴³ Heera Sumanta: *Kakababur Sannidhye Kayekti Bachar* (A Few Years with The Uncle)

Ganashakti - Issue on the Birth Centenary of Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (July 1989), Kolkata, pp. 118-119

entertainment. As few days passed, the 'uncle' reacted, 'Do you think that I have not noticed anything? You must come back to the commune timely. Remember that indiscipline should not be indulged.' This reflected the character of the 'uncle' who was affectionate but disciplinarian. The same was true about the other senior comrades like Promode Dasgupta and Saroj Mukherjee."⁴⁴

A description of Manikuntala Sen, a member of the Communist Party since the early days of the party in the state shows how the party ranks imbibed this kind of teaching:

"Some of the full-timers of the party like Amrita Nag, Jyoti Dasgupta lived in a commune. They did not get any money from the party. Who would provide them with regular allowance? They themselves held leading positions in the party organizations at the district level. The small fund which the party could generate was needed to meet the party's expenditure. What little could be saved was used to feed the party members. On so many occasions I had been a witness to their austere lunch with rice, a little quantity of pulses and fried chilli. Sometimes pulses too were cut off from the menu. And this meal too was served only once a day."⁴⁵

In her own party career also Manikuntala Sen appreciated the necessity of developing a popular lifestyle to ensure acceptability to the people. While working in the remote villages of Tamluk, she consciously cultivated some of the rural habits:

"Within a few days I gave up the habit of using soap and paste-brush. At the bank of the village pond this habit appeared as a luxury to the village children who cast curious glance at me. This was really embarrassing."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Dasgupta Samir. *Aamar Dristite Kakababu o Tar Siksha* (In My View The Uncle and His Teachings) *Ganashakti* -Issue on the Birth Centenary of Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (July 1989), p. 149

⁴⁵ Sen Manikuntala: *Sediner Katha*, p. 84

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 92

The same experience was repeated when Manikuntala Sen came to work in the slums of Kalighat which was also her electoral constituency:

“Once a very close friend warned me, ‘Why do you come here in such a neat and clean dress regularly? This would tarnish your communist image.’ He seemed to be genuinely worried. As a whole time party cadre I hardly possessed more than four sets of dress. I myself washed them and pressed them under my pillow for ironing. This was the secret of my clean white dress. But that gentleman named Nirmal respected me as his elder sister and accompanied me during my tours. He apprehended that my cleanliness might have been misunderstood by the people living in slums. Hence he made me alert.”⁴⁷

The spirit of austerity and the sense of discipline were accompanied by an attitude of care and partnership. This made the political cadres the social comrades of the people and consequently legitimized their political leadership among a struggling community. Dr. Naresh Banerjee, a partner of the party's trade union politics, narrated his experience:

“July 1943. The famine spread. A number of people sought refuge in Kidderpore region. At the instruction of the party we opened two centres for supplying free meal to the famine-stricken people.

... We took a share of the ration of the ordinary workers and the help from the local traders to make our effort successful. Sometimes military trucks also supplied cereal at night. ... At one evening the ‘uncle’ came up with a team of Kumud Biswas and Nripen Chakraborty, Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari, Chittaprasad and others. He made minute observation and enquired about every detail. He appreciated our performance and encouraged us to undertake such actions. This reminded me the attitude of a few of our comrades, who considered these welfare activities as digression from the primary ideal and objective of the Communist Party. They apprehended

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 224

that engagement with social work might beat the revolutionary programme with a retreat. The 'uncle' listened to everyone. Finally, he gave his opinion, "The human resource is the greatest of all resources in the earth. For a nation its real treasure is its people. Our immediate task is to mitigate the sufferings of the masses. Through the trade union movements we try to secure some immediate economic benefits for the workers. At the same time, we would try to raise the level of their social and class-consciousness, and link the movement on immediate issues with the struggle to achieve national liberation and freedom from exploitation. ... The majority of these distressed and poor people are peasants and agrarian leaders. You have to achieve their confidence by offering earnest and sincere service to them. Instead of begging favour from others they should be self-reliant. At the same time, you would make them aware of the real cause of their distress. They would recognize the British imperialism, rich landlords, hoarders and profiteers as their real enemies. In other words, through social work you would have to create a sense of solidarity among them. Then mobilize them into action for achieving the ultimate aim."⁴⁸

The image of a self-sacrificing man, ready to respond to the need of the poor and destitute, however, was not an exclusive monopoly of the communist cadres. Even the communists were inspired by instances of the great national leaders who believed in a different ideology but shared a common sense of humanism. Manikuntala Sen mentioned with great respect:

"The Communist Party, however, alone did not set the example of self-sacrifice for the sake of ideology. The Congress movement in our country was equally rich with the stories of sufferings and sacrifice of its innumerable followers"⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Banerjee Dr. Naresh: *Kakababu: Marxiya Manabatar Aadarshaswarup* (A Model of Marxist Humanism) 'Ganashakti'-Issue on the Birth Centenary of Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (July, 1989), p. 114

⁴⁹ Sen Manikuntala: *Sediner Katha*, p. 84

In a similar way the communists too could draw for themselves the veneration of men irrespective of political affiliation. Rasamay Majumdar noted such an incident in his memoirs. During the communal outburst of 1946 when most of the people and even some political activists were fleeing, Mr Majumdar, a young cadre of the party at Noakhali, along with a few colleagues took a vow to fight the evil forces. Majumdar was hard hit by a frenzied rioter. When Gandhiji made his journey of peace there he hailed this young man who was not a political follower of Gandhi but could implement his social message:

"The Congressmen could not inform him (Gandhiji) much about the riot. But Kshitishda (Dr. Kshitish Prasad Chattopadhyay) who met Gandhiji at his own initiative told him the story in detail. Gandhi got struck with wonder and asked the Congress cadres, "Where have you been gone?" They replied, "It was impossible to stay here." He lost his temper and asked in a demanding voice, "How could these boys stick to the soil of Chaumahani?" "I would like to see that young chap", he told further, "who without caring for his own life dared to face the rioters and ultimately resisted them."

The story, however, did not end in showing veneration to each other by the members of the two opponent parties. With due respect to Gandhi as a man of peace and sharing goodwill Mazumdar, however, did not fail to point out the limitations of the Gandhian politics to combat this social crisis. He continued:

"Despite his sincere attempt it was not possible for Gandhiji to stop this communal violence. The Congress Party is mainly consisted of big capitalists and factory owners, zamindars and talukdars and rich peasants. They are against the peasants and workers and also against the communists. These people, for the sake of their own interests, provoke communal actions."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Mazumdar Rasamay: *Noakhali Dinlipi*, p. 68

This is the way that a communist projected himself before the society. Irreligiosity was compensated by a high degree of morality. Rejection of age-old social values and rituals could be made tolerable by a deep sense of humanism. Once the social message was conveyed to the people, the political campaign of the party began. In other words, if the radical rhetoric was the legitimizing force of the communist politics the social ethics of the communists was the magic wand to captivate the popular imagination.

Chapter - IV

The Crisis Within (1962-1964)

Populism: A Course to Progress

The year 1962 opened with the third General Election (February 1962) that returned the Congress to power once again. The electoral results, however, had some significant implications for the development of the communist opposition politics in West Bengal. Jyoti Basu assessed the situation in the following terms:

“In this election too we failed to create an alternative government in West Bengal. But it is undeniable that this electoral experience invoked a popular spirit which was totally unprecedented. Ours was a limited objective of changing the government only in a single state. But the electoral contest despite this very limited objective too assumed the form of a great political struggle. No doubt, the slogan of an alternative government added a new dimension to this electoral contest. Our ambition was not fulfilled. But the Congress too did not succeed in marginalizing the opposition forces, particularly the Communist Party.”¹

The achievements through which the party could make itself appear as a political alternative to the Congress were many and spectacular. The areas of contest were increasing and the required strength for the fight was growing. The party not only fielded candidates in many of the seats which it had not contested in the earlier elections, but large scale campaigns and meetings were arranged in those places. Out of the 252 seats in the Assembly the Communist Party along with its leftist allies fought in 229 seats. The CPI alone won 50 seats with 24.97% of the total valid votes. In *Loksabha* (the Lower House of the Indian Parliament) election also it won 9 seats with 26.2% of the total

¹ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwititya Khanda)*, p 99

valid votes.² The real success of the Communist Party in the Elections of 1962 lay in its emergence as a State Party in the true sense of the term. In 1952, the vote for the communists crossed more than 10% of the total votes cast only in 6 out of 16 districts in West Bengal. But in 1962 in none of the districts except Purulia and Murshidabad the party received less than 10% of the total votes. Only in 6 districts the number was less than 20% of the total votes. In 4 districts, viz, Calcutta, Hooghly, 24 Parganas and Bardhaman the number reached more than 30% of the total votes. As per seats acquired, 11 districts produced only 4 in 1952 but in 1962 made it 25 which constituted half of the total seats gained by the party in this election. In 1952, in 7 districts the communists could not achieve a single seat. In 1962, the number was reduced to only 2 (Purulia and Jalpaiguri). This was a clear indication of the party's growing strength in the districts far from Calcutta. The Communist Party extended its popular base in rural areas, particularly among the poor peasants and the agrarian labourers. Among the refugees the electoral support to the Communist Party was almost unequivocal.³

Certain weak points of the party were, however, apparent from its electoral performance. In industrial zones the success of the leftist forces was not very impressive. The organized workers generally voted for the left but the unorganized section of the workers, particularly from the Hindi-speaking community, favoured the Congress. The urban intellectuals and the middle class mostly supported the left but their counterpart in the countryside was not so receptive. Even in the agrarian sector, the support from the middle and the poor peasants was not sure

² *Election Results of West Bengal Statistics and Analysis*

Communist Party of India (Marxist) West Bengal State Committee

³ Dasgupta Biplab. *Jyotibabur Sange (Pratham Parba, Up to 1967)*

and extensive. Apart from the capitalists and the big monopolists in both industry and agriculture, who were connected with the Congress regime by their class interests, a section of the students and youths were also won over by the Congress. On the whole, though the leftist forces extended their popular base, the class identities of the population had not yet been fully reflected in political choices.⁴

However, a radical face of popular politics could be found in the communist programme of mobilizing the masses on various social and economic issues like the rising prices of essential commodities, enhancement of railway fares, increased taxes, etc. Agitation in Calcutta port by the pilot officers, the workers of Howrah Jute Mills and Howrah National Iron and Steel Co., and the schoolteachers kept the popular movement in full swing in the city and its suburbs.⁵

Shadow Lines: Onset of a Crisis

While regarding popular support the communists could expect a progressive development, the party faced the real crisis in its internal schism. A broad-spectrum ideological debate over the role of the Indian bourgeoisie as well as over the strategy and tactics of the Indian revolution that had developed among the communists since the birth of the party heightened in the years of the early '60s.

The Communist Party, since its beginning on Indian soil, faced the vexed problem of balancing the ideological purity with pragmatism. The sharp and single-ended class struggle to break through the evil nexus of the bourgeois-landlord and the foreign capitalists had often been punctuated by class

⁴ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

⁵ Annual Police Report 1962

I.B. Records, Serial No. 255/1928

collaborations and short-term programme for immediate relief. During the 1930s a united front was created with the 'pro-capitalist Congress Party' for the anti-imperialist struggle which was a common concern. Similarly, after 1951, in the absence of political and psychological preparation for organizing a revolution, electoral means were adopted to achieve some immediate gains. However, these attempts for adaptation with constitutional politics were not without protest and opposition. The strategy of collective struggle against imperialism that generated a reformist tone in the party programme was reverted by the idea of a sharply focused position on class struggle in the late '40s. This was another miscalculated venture. Militancy turned into reckless adventurism. Intensification of class struggle paved the way for sectarianism. However, this proliferation of left activism marked a note of dissent against the attempt to dilute a radical ideology by the water of pragmatism. In a similar way, the growing prominence of the Communist Party in electoral politics in the 1950s was also paralleled by an endemic controversy within the party ranks about the assessment of parliamentary democracy in India, the selection of political allies and the nature of the alternative government which the communists had envisaged.

Ideological Controversy: International Incentive

This controversy was enlivened in the context of a major division in the international communist camp.⁶ The Moscow Declaration (1957) and the Moscow Statement (1960), made

⁶ Basu Jyoti, Sen Niranjana On Some Questions Concerning The Ideological Controversy Within The International Communist Movement
Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol. X-A, 1964 Part-I

out of a conference of 81 countries, defined a guideline for the communist parties all over the world. But no unanimity of action could be developed among the various factions of the communists as the interpretation of this guideline varied. The prescribed draft of action was claimed to have been formulated on the basis of the analysis of the profound changes in the objective conditions of the world since the Second World War. The documents identified three great revolutionary forces of the modern period and pointed out four major areas of contradiction in the world situation where these revolutionary forces had been working. These contradictions were:

- a) The contradiction between the world capitalist system and the world socialist system.
- b) The contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the capitalist countries.
- c) The contradiction between the oppressed nations and imperialism.
- d) The contradiction among the imperialist countries and among the monopoly capitalist groups.

Out of these contradictions emerged three great revolutionary forces of the modern period:

- i) the world socialist system ii) the national liberation movement iii) the revolutionary movement of the working class in capitalist countries.

These three revolutionary forces were claimed to be closely interlinked and merged into one powerful current, thus constituting an integral world revolutionary process. However, in this process the centrality of the contradiction between the world capitalist system and the world socialist system was always emphasized.

But the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Communist Party of China (CPC), the two guides of world communism, provided contradictory interpretations of those directives. The CPC gave pivotal importance to the contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed nation violating the prescription of the original documents. The CPSU subscribed to the international guidelines by recognizing the contradiction between the capitalist and the socialist systems as the primary dynamic of revolution. But it underestimated the three other areas of contradiction and thus ignored the interconnection among the sets of contradictory forces in society.

The most serious dissension, however, arose on the issue of possibility of peaceful transition to socialism. According to the Moscow Statement, in a divided world the only correct and reasonable principle of international relations was the principle of peaceful co-existence of different social systems. By peaceful co-existence it, however, did not mean status quo between capitalism and socialism. Nor did it rule out the non-peaceful ways of action for achieving socialist ends. Rather, it was hoped that the so-called peaceful co-existence would facilitate the prospects of world revolution. Peaceful coexistence would defeat the imperialist policy of solving its contradictions through war and intervention. It would compel the imperialists to test their strength with socialism through peaceful competition in political, economic and ideological fields.

But both of the leading communist countries accepted the principle with a one-sided approach. The CPC was sceptical about this principle and conceded only to the extent that peaceful co-existence was advantageous for achieving peaceful

international environment for socialist construction, for exposing and isolating the imperialist forces of aggression. But nowhere was the recognition that peaceful co-existence itself created favourable conditions for revolutionary struggles of the peoples. The CPC considered the people's democratic revolution and armed uprising as the only effective means for all communist parties fighting for national liberation. Similarly, in foreign policy too, the CPC estimated the line of peaceful co-existence as diametrically opposed to the idea of proletarian internationalism which it thought to be the fundamental principle of all socialist countries. But it failed to understand that the two principles represented two aspects of the international policy of the socialist states and both were equally important. By following a policy of peaceful co-existence the socialist countries were expected to force the imperialists to forsake the path of war and undo the policy of exporting counter-revolution. By following proletarian internationalism the socialist countries were expected to cement the solidarity among themselves and granted assistance to the revolutionary movement in different countries.

The CPSU was equally one-sided as it failed to imbibe the dynamic import of the principle of peaceful co-existence. It failed to recognize this idea as a specific form of struggle with imperialism. It was accused to have confused the theory of peaceful coexistence of states with peaceful coexistence of classes. In consequence, it fostered an illusion about imperialism and used the theory in justification of an opportunist compromise with the imperialist forces.

The basic debate, therefore, developed around the issue of the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism. The Moscow Declaration stated that the communists always sought to achieve the socialist revolution by peaceful means but it was the ruling class which resorted to armed suppression of the people and had recourse to non-peaceful means of transition imperative. The radical changes in the balance of forces between capitalism and socialism in contemporary world increased the chance of peaceful development of the revolution. This did not mean that the non-peaceful way could be completely ruled out. In many countries it remained the most likely course and that advantage should be taken wherever it existed. The CPC, while professing the acceptance of the Moscow Statement, in all their actual arguments denied the possibility of the peaceful path. The CPSU, on the other hand, took an equally wrong step by advocating the peaceful path for socialism as the absolute rule for all parties.

Ideological Controversy: National Perspective

The two rival models of socialism presented by the two leading camps of communism broke the unity of the socialist world and enthused new lines of thought and new ways of action among the communist parties in different countries. The Indian communists too, following these two different guidelines, advocated two contradictory interpretations on various national issues. The battle of ideas gained ground under a spell of political happenings related to the Indian nation. The most crucial of them was the Chinese issue. Already since 1959 the Chinese and the Soviet camps had begun to differ on their assessment of the nature of the Nehru Government. When Dalai Lama fled to India in April in 1959 after the Chinese Government had

suppressed the Tibetan revolt, the Chinese charged that the revolt had been directed from Kalimpong town in India.⁷ But the Moscow leadership ignored the allegation.

The Indian communists too became divided according to these contradictory explanations. The central leadership of the party followed the Moscow line but a dissident group clung to the Chinese position and criticized Nehru's interfering policy in China's internal affairs. The rift between the two groups widened on the issue of the border dispute that ultimately entangled the two countries in a military conflict at the end of 1962. The 'rightist' group supported Nehru and took a nationalist stance. The extremists, on the other hand, condemned the India

⁷ Gopal Ram: *India-China-Tibet Triangle*, Mumbai, 1964

There was a charge by the Chinese that Kalimpong had been the centre of rebellion. On July 1958 the Foreign Office of China sent a note to the Counsellor of India regarding the subversive and disruptive activities against China's Tibet region carried out by the U.S. and the Chiang Kai-shek clique in collusion with the fugitive reactionaries from Tibet using Kalimpong as a base. The note alleged that the subversive elements frequently held meetings in Kalimpong. Various reactionary organizations had been set up in Kalimpong under such names as Tibetan Freedom League, Kalimpong-Tibetan Welfare Conference, Buddhist Association. The organizations printed various reactionary leaflets and propaganda materials and smuggled them into Tibet. Some of the propaganda materials were even alleged to have called on the Tibetan people to rise up against the Chinese Government and advocated the separation of Tibet from China. After the outbreak of rebellion the accusation was multiplied and repeated.

On August 2, 1958 the Government of India's Ministry of External Affairs sent a reply to the Chinese note expressing surprise and saying that the statement contained in this note must have been based on a misunderstanding of facts. The Government of India had no evidence that the U.S. Government and the Kuomintang regime were using Kalimpong as a base for disruptive activities against China's Tibetan region. India Government recognized that from time immemorial there was inter-communication between India and Tibet. There was also a feeling of cultural kinship. But that of course did not mean that India interfered in Tibet. The Government of India claimed to have made it clear to all Tibetans that they would be permitted to stay in India only if they would carry on their vocations peacefully.

Government as inner aggressor. Somnath Lahiri, addressing the Legislative Assembly, revealed these party divergences:

“The Chinese aggression has rudely threatened our ideological position. Hence we have made an earnest attempt to resist this aggression and protect our nation.

I must admit that some of our comrades in the National Council of the Communist Party hesitated a lot to come to such a conclusion. ... We had great faith in the promises that China upheld in their ideals, in Chinese assessment of India, in China's effort for world peace. So, how could we believe that China would suddenly break her promises? Quite naturally, after an intense struggle with our own ideas and beliefs we came to this conclusion. ... But our party is ruled by democratic centralism. We entertain dissensions and differences of opinions until we take the decision. But once the decision is taken, we are all bound to follow it. Any violation of this principle is liable to bring the exclusion of that member from the party. This is the democratic rule of our party.”⁸

This statement implies that a strong voice of dissent was emerging within the party and the old leadership was not ready to come to terms with it even at the cost of losing some of its members.

The other side was equally stubborn. Jyoti Basu who for a long time maintained a centrist position to bridge up gap but finally joined the leftist camp pointed out the fundamental differences between the two groups on three issues:

One of the issues, according to him, originated long ago. In 1951 a party programme was chalked out. But within two years it was found irrelevant in the present conditions of the country. The breach of opinion, however, came over the

⁸ *Deshrakshay Communista Drirhasankalpa* (The Communists Vow to Protect the Country) – A speech in the Legislative Assembly, November 17, 1962 Collected from *Somnath Lahiri Rachanabali* (Collections of Somnath Lahiri), Vol.-4, Kolkata, 1995, pp. 28-29

formulation of a changed programme. The two sections of the party leadership had two contradictory explanations of the class politics in Indian society and consequently provided two different programmes. One group which was called the National Front held that the Indian State was owned by the nationalist bourgeoisie and the communists should ally with the progressive section of them to make a broad anti-imperialist front. The other camp to which Basu himself belonged, called itself the Democratic Front. This group held that the controlling power in the Indian State remained with the big industrialists and the *zamindars*. It also believed that because of the nexus of these two groups the development of capitalism was incomplete in India. In other words, this group, according to Basu, was urging for incessant struggle, while the other group advocated alliance with the Congress. Those who belonged to the Democratic Front mostly joined the CPI(M), whereas the majority of the supporters of the National Front formed the CPI.

Another reason which Jyoti Basu pointed out was the Sino-Soviet debate over ideology. Here the major portion of the National Front sided with the Soviet Party. The Democratic Front to which Basu belonged, however, did not have such complete allegiance to the Chinese Party.

The third reason of dissension was identified as the frontier question. Regarding this issue one group accepted the explanation of the Government of India and held China responsible for creating the problem. But Basu's group did not subscribe to such an account and found some validity in China's opinion. This group demanded that a peaceful solution to this problem should be made through the discussion between the two governments. Jyoti Basu regretted that they earnestly wanted

the improvement of the Sino-Indian relationship. But they were branded as 'pro-Chinese', 'traitors', 'enemies to Indian nation'.⁹

Struggle or Squabble

Though the legitimacy of the battle of ideas emanated from the international atmosphere, it is doubtful that the rival groups of Indian communists were fighting purely an ideological battle. Manikuntala Sen who withdrew from active politics in view of this experience of factionalism was sceptical about the ideological content of this struggle:

"I am sure that those who led the party to split through dissension and disagreement, were not fighting for an ideological cause. They had a vile design."¹⁰

Govin Knadar who was then a young party cadre and was a prisoner at Dum Dum jail since November 1962 in the context of the Sino-Indian conflict was shocked by the narrow factional outlook of the upper level members and leaders:

"When I was brought to Dum Dum jail I found that the leaders like Promode Dasgupta had virtually divided the party into two sections, viz., 'Real Revolutionaries' and 'Dangeites'. ...In the prison these leaders did not produce any political document. They were not concerned with doctrines and principles. What they all bothered about were persons and lobbies. ...Instead of fighting a political and ideological battle they resorted to scandals and slanderous activities."¹¹

Personal rivalries and internal distensions of the Party members, however, could be traced to a few decades ago. Indeed all the serious phases of ideological controversy within the party had been associated with spells of personal rivalry among the

⁹ Dasgupta Biplob: *Jyotibabur Sange(Pratham Parba, Up to 1967)*, pp. 81-83

¹⁰ Sen Manikuntala: *Sediner Katha*, p. 298

¹¹ Knarar Govin: *Communist Bhangan O Birodh-Sesh Kothay* (Split and Dissension among the Communists – Where Does It End), Kolkata, 1993, p. 2

party members. The political ambition of the party leaders that was grounded on and legitimized by the search for the right course of Indian revolution manifested itself in factional strife, and also tended to mobilize the party ranks along rival lines. The late 1940s witnessed such a vertical division within the party. The formal split could be temporarily avoided by a series of inner party debates that managed to evolve a unanimously acceptable party line, approved by the international peers. But a voice of dissent that raised political questions about the party lines and charged the social relations among the party members with an expression of defiance and disbelief could not be silenced altogether. Abani Lahiri who started his political career as a member of the communist student union and later became a renowned activist in the party's agrarian front found the reasons of the party split to be embedded in this long-standing personal dissension. In his memoirs he remembered an incident of 1952 when he had been just released from the jail:

“Being released from the jail I found the party in such a condition which I never dreamt of. Inner party dissension was in full swing. Suspicion and disbelief among the members were reigning supreme. The party was divided into two groups. I was stunned to know that Bhavani Sen, the former Secretary of the party, was totally destitute.... One day I found Somnath Lahiri, another distinguished leader, in the party office. When he came, no one requested him to sit. ...No doubt, they committed serious mistakes in leading the party. But their devotion and self-sacrifice since the birth of the party was also unquestionable. I wonder how these persons were treated like enemies! It is undeniable that such behaviour had deep psychological impact and reaction at the time of the breaking of the party. I firmly believe that such personal grudge, actions and counter-actions were no less responsible than the ideological dissension to split the party.”¹²

¹² Lahiri Abani: *Tirish Challisher Bangla – Rajniti O Andoloner Abhynata Prasange* (Interviewed and edited by Ranajit Dasgupta), pp 141-142

This personal animosity was intensified in the context of a number of incidents within and outside the party. The death of Ajoy Ghosh in January 1964 removed the only effective mediator between the right and left factions within the party. The man who could convert the slanderous schism into political debate and hold the factions together as a disciplined united team by his personal disposition was no longer there and the absence reflected itself in the functioning of the party's organization. Ranen Sen and Sudhangshu Dasgupta, who ideologically belonged to two rival factions, however, agreed upon this personal factor in manipulating and harnessing the party's divide. Mr Dasgupta pointed out:

“ . The conflict of opinions was intensified day by day within the party. Along with this in the first half of 1962 a constitutional crisis arose over the issue of party leadership after the death of Ajoy Ghosh. The majority of the members of the National Council wanted to select E. M. S. Namboodiripad as the General Secretary. The Dange group agreed conditionally. The condition was that Dange should be made the Chairman of the party. But the Chairmanship had hitherto been unknown in the Communist Party. In other words, a new post had to be created in the party for Dange. To prevent the party from splitting the proposal was accepted. Dange became the Chairman and E. M. S. Namboodiripad became the General Secretary. They were associated with a composite secretariat which included comrades from all shades of opinions. But the expectation was not fulfilled. The unity of the party could not be secured. Rather a split became inevitable.”¹³

Ranen Sen also lamented:

“After the partition of the Communist Party of India a Soviet expert named Kutsebin wrote in one of his books (Sterling Publication) that had Ajoy Ghosh been alive the party could not have been divided so easily. I

¹³ Dasgupta Sudhangshu: *Andaman Jail The Communist Party*, pp. 146-147

think he was absolutely correct in assessing the situation. Had he been alive, neither E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Jyoti Basu, Rammurti nor Dange, Joshi, Rajeshwar Rao, Dr. Adhikari could drag the party into partition. Bhupesh, Josh or myself, despite our leftist orientation, at least did not want the division of the party, and earnestly tried to prevent it. At that critical moment we were continually feeling the absence of Ajoy.”¹⁴

Similarly, the death of Chief Minister B. C. Roy in July indicated a change in the Congress leadership. This encouraged the radical group among the communists to maintain a militant posture against Congress policies. A group of young activists most of whom operated at the local level rallied around men like Promode Dasgupta, who in their turn mobilizing the local party committees tried to put pressure on the Dangeite leadership at the top. The ‘rightists’, on the other hand, were still firmly rooted in their belief in the progressivism of the Congress Party and its government both at the Centre and the state. Hirendra Nath Mukherjee, for example, who distinguished himself as a member of Parliament of the Communist Party at this period and later joined the CPI, counted the parliamentary democracy and its chief architect Jawaharlal Nehru as a major asset of the Indian nation after decolonization. While writing on the occasion of the fifty years of Indian independence, the Nehruvian regime and the early parliamentary democracy, in hindsight, appeared to him as one of the glorious phases of Indian nation-state:

“I am not joking but with all seriousness I state that whatever might be the effectiveness of the parliamentary system in bringing fundamental change in society we must give due credit to this conventional system which was instrumental in bringing whatever achievement India has made after independence. We must not forget about the complexities in international politics in the post-Second World War years, the declaration of “Cold War”

¹⁴ Sen Ranen. *Bharater Communist Partyr Katha* (1948-1964), P. 323

by Truman-Churchill against the Soviet Union since 1946, the rise of Great China, the trials and crises in Indian nation, the success and failure to alleviate the trauma of partition, and many other constraints which the new-born parliament in post- independent India had to face in its first decade (1952-62). Considering all these it would perhaps be not unjustified to boast of the parliamentary system in India during this period. At that time our ideological battle against Jawaharlal Nehru was at its extreme....

Yet, I must admit that it was an honour to be a member of the first sovereign assembly of the country after independence. We felt both pride and pleasure in the kind of juvenile adventurism which we practised against the front-ranking leaders of the nation. Incidents of chaos and indiscipline in the parliament were not unknown in those days also. But this did not become customary. Plans and programmes were formulated and executed with sincerity, diligence and genuine interest. We must recall those features, while comparing those days with our present experience.

Despite innumerable failures, this earnest endeavour to make life a meaningful journey and this spirit of enterprise would protect the memory of Jawaharlal Nehru from dishonour and neglect. This is really haunting that after the death of Nehru in the condolence meeting at the United Nations in May 1964 the representative of Morocco paid his homage with the words that Nehru was "the sculptor of the ethics of our part of the world".¹⁵

In a similar way, being a communist politician when he laboured to write the biography of a Congress leader, he found in him a colossal builder of Indian nation whose image could transcend all political shades and affiliations. He commented on Nehru:

"There is no doubting that "the young gentleman" had formed a genuine attraction for Communism, not so much on account of its ideology but of sincere admiration of the Soviet achievement and an aversion to and

¹⁵ Mukherjee Hirendra Nath: *Swadhin Bharate Samsadiya Byabastha* (Parliamentary System in Independent India), '*Desh*'-*Swadhinatar Subarnajayanti Sankhya* (The Commemorative Volume at The Fifty Years of Independence), Kolkata, August 9, 1997, pp. 60

impatience of Social Democrats, represented as they were in Indian eyes by the British Labour Party. "I turned inevitably", he wrote, "with goodwill towards Communism, for whatever its faults it was at least not hypocritical and not imperialistic". ... The fact was that Jawaharlal had acquired firmly a wider perspective and the conviction that political freedom to be real implied social and economic justice and the elimination of exploitation which was the aim of Socialism or Communism, whatever one's fears and doubts about its members and mannerisms."¹⁶

In other words, there was a genuine faith in some of the communist minds about Nehru's conviction about socialism. This faith persisted and influenced the theoretical depiction of the class character of the Nehru era. In consequence, it mitigated the political antagonism between the Congress policy and the official line of the Communist Party, while it widened the ideological gap among the members of the Communist Party. Ideological divergence, combined with the competitive political ambition of the leaders, created acute factional and personal rivalries within the party.

Squabbles and vilification reached their height on the issue of Dange letters. S. A. Dange who headed the party during this period was discredited by a bunch of letters discovered by a group of research scholars in 1964 from the National Archives of India in Bombay and published in an English weekly *Current* of Bombay. Dange wrote these letters from Kanpur Jail after his four years' imprisonment there in the Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case in 1924. In these letters he prayed for mercy of the British Government of India in lieu of his good service to

¹⁶ Mukherjee Hiren: *The Gentle Colossus-A Study of Jawaharlal Nehru*, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 45-46

them. In one of these letters (Dated 31.07.1924) written to the Governor-General-in-Council Dange mentioned:

“I might also refer to another incident exactly one year back, the Deputy Commissioner of Police of Bombay, Mr. Stewart was having a conversation with me, in his office, regarding my relations with M. N. Roy and an anticipated visit to me of certain persons from abroad. During the course of the conversation the Honourable officer let drop a hint in the following words, the full import of which I failed to catch at that moment. Mr. Stewart said, “You hold an exceptionally influential position in certain circles here and abroad. Government would be glad if this position would be of some use to them.” I think I still hold that position. Rather it has been enhanced by the prosecution. If your Excellency is pleased to think that I should use that position for the good of Your Excellency’s Government and the country, I should be glad to do so, if I am given the opportunity by Your Excellency granting my prayer for release.”¹⁷

The letter amounted to open betrayal to the nationalist cause. The Dangeites tried to defend themselves by arguing that the letters had been forged by the British Government. Their defence revolved round an issue of discrepancy in the spelling of Dange’s first name. In the first two letters it was signed with ‘d’ as ‘Shripad’ and in other two with ‘t’ as ‘Shripat’. According to them, this was a vital difference since ‘Shripad’ was a *brahmin* name and ‘Shripat’ was a non-*brahmin* name. But the leftist opponents found no substance in this argument because according to them in police files examples of such variations of spelling were not uncommon.

Besides, the followers of Dange cited some remarks of different Government officials to show the actual estimation of Dange by the then British Government as a selfless patriot. They, for instance, quoted two remarks of T. Sloan, “The desire for

¹⁷ Dange Unmasked: Repudiate the Revisionists (Appendix-I) *Documents of the Communist Movement in India* Vol -X-A, pp. 264

release on the part of these two prisoners does not appear to be activated by any motive of genuine repentance”, and “...in view of his past activities, it is extremely doubtful if it would serve any useful purpose....” But the opponents dismissed the whole effort as a ‘poor attempt’. Rather, they referred to a parallel opinion made by Bombay Government’s Home Department to Mr Crerar, Home Secretary, that no action was necessary, that Dange’s writings contained very little anti-British sentiments and, if carefully followed, he would be a very good source of information.¹⁸

The situation worsened when Dange group reacted by forming an investigating committee in consensus with the leftist block. Even the rightists were divided on the issue. The committee which was formed by the National Council with mainly the rightist members was not unanimous in its report. There was a majority report signed by five members, viz. S. V. Ghate, G. Adhikari, C. Rajeshwar Rao, C. Achutha Menon and Hiren Mukherjee. It categorically denied all charges of conspiracy against Dange. Bhupesh Gupta and Sohan Singh Josh, the two signatories to the minority report, too mentioned that there was no proof that Comrade Dange at any time acted as a British agent or was a British spy. The repudiation by the National Council of the charge, therefore, in their opinion, stood fully justified. The minority report, however, said:

“After thus carefully considering all the relevant materials and subject to the limitations from which the present enquiry has suffered, we have come to the conclusion that it does not stand proved that any of the four ‘Dange letters’ is forged.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid. & Ahmad Muzaffar: *Amar Jivan O Bharater Communist Party*

¹⁹ Collected from the *Proceedings of the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of India* (Bombay, December 13-23, 1964): Vol.-I, Communist Party of India, New Delhi, 1965

Comparing the two reports the Central Committee handled the problem in a tricky way. In its statement, it did not clearly mention that the letters were forged. But considering the entire public record of Comrade Dange for the last forty years, the positions of trust he had held along inside the party, his seventeen years in prison including thirteen years in British jails and the great working class movement he had built the Committee was convinced of his political integrity and his devotion to the cause of the party. On the contrary, the Committee emphatically mentioned the necessity of punitive actions against the rebellious cadres for their 'disruptive and splitting activities' and 'open slander' against 'the party and its chairman'.²⁰

The Dange group further retaliated by opening another series of slanderous campaign against the leftist leaders. Ranen Sen who subscribed to the party's official line but did not like the slanderous schism among the party members made a note of this retaliation:

"Dange replied that had I written those letters why I was not released from the jail and why I became imprisoned for several times in later years too. He also asked why, on the other hand, Muzaffar Ahmad invariably got release all the time after his imprisonment on the ground of ill health.

Scandal and defamation reached its height. The person who discovered Dange's letter brought out another document from the same archive. This document showed that Muzaffar Ahmad was an employee of the Intelligence Department of Bengal Police and was assigned to write the police reports in Bengali. Resigning from the job he entered politics. This information also burst like a bomb."²¹

²⁰ The statement of the Central Committee was reported in Hindustan Standard, April 2, 1964

²¹ Sen Ranen: *Bharater Communist Partir Itibritta*, p. 168

‘Things Fell Apart: The Centre Could Not Hold’

Thus the dissension boiled on two issues: the ideological purity of the party programme and the personal integrity of the party leaders. The accusations and counter-accusations took the form of acute factionalism for control over the party’s organizations. In this factional rivalry the Dangeites had a favourable position because of their hold over most of the authoritative posts within the institutional framework of the party. Naturally the official party line and propaganda reflected a rightist tone. The leftists, on the other hand, decried the rightist authority for ignoring the opposition voice in formulation of the party’s programme. The Dangeites were also accused of opening the evil nexus with the Congress. They were blamed to have induced the ruling party to continue its wartime repressive measures against their factional opponents within the Communist Party.²²

But the opponents could not be silenced. Rather full-scale campaign to mobilize the masses and convince the party ranks as well as an attempt to create parallel agencies to override the mainstream party organization began. The leftist ideologues most of whom had been arrested under the Defence of India Rules for following an anti-nationalist stance since the outbreak of the Indo-Chinese War, formed a rival group inside the jail. Outside the jail also, an alternative party line was projected. Sudhanshu Dasgupta who belonged to the left faction recounted the process of creation of this new front:

“November 22, 1962. Early in the morning I arrived at the office of our newspaper – *Swadhinata*. I found no policeman there but met the Dangeite leaders like Somnath Lahiri, Bhavani Sen, Bishwanath Mukherjee. It was revealed that they had captured the head office of the party’s State

²² Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

Committee at 64 Lower Circular Road and had also taken control of *Swadhinata*. A few of us like Comrade Adhir Chakraborty, Comrade Arun Dasgupta, Comrade Shailesh Chaudhuri, Comrade Mihir Ghose Dastidar, Comrade Arun Ray and myself had been retrenched from the newspaper office.

...By that time it was really difficult for us to carry on ideological struggle. We did not have any mouthpiece. Nor did our fund permit the publication of any pamphlet or booklet. The revisionist leaders of the party, on the other hand, fully utilized *Swadhinata* to launch their political battle against us.

...We began to unite the local party units and organize public meetings to expose the revisionists.

...The General Body meeting at North Calcutta came as an eye-opener for us. We became sure that the revisionists would find no place in this state. At the same time, we appreciated the immediate need of a weekly journal to mobilize the comrades at the lower level. But how could we provide it? Then it was extremely difficult to acquire the 'declaration' of a new magazine because of the restrictions imposed by the Indian Security Act. Yet we were not disheartened.

...Comrade Tarapada and Comrade Dhruba managed to convert fortnightly *Howrah Hitaishi* into weekly *Desh Hitaishi*.

...*Desh Hitaishi* was published in the morning of August 15 – the Independence Day. We were in dilemma about the number of copies to be printed. After much calculation we fixed the number of first issue at five thousand and five hundred. But within a few hours the stock was exhausted. There was a large gathering of the comrades in front of the small office room of our journal. All of them were eagerly asking: why have you printed the paper in such a small number? Don't you appreciate our demand?

We assured them, - from the next issue we must fulfil your demand.

The publication of *Desh Hitaishi* had an electrifying impact upon a large section of our comrades. We printed seven thousand five hundred copies of the second issue and in case of the third issue the number reached twelve thousand five hundred. This journal showed our comrades the right way in politics and provided them the mouthpiece for ideological battle.”²³

²³ Dasgupta Sudhangshu: *Andaman Jail Theke Communist Partyte*, pp. 149-154

Sudhangshu Dasgupta further narrated that the office of *Desh Hitaishi* soon became a parallel party office where the dissident leaders interacted with the comrades from far-flung districts, who visited them in search of a new party line. The exalted expression of the 'leftist' comrade of the Communist Party was substantiated by a contemporary newspaper report:

"In fact, the Peking group started controlling the party affairs in West Bengal with considerable support from the rank and file. The right wingers were unable to cause any dent in this support to the left group."²⁴

In March 1964 the publication of *Ganashakti*, initially as a weekly and later as a daily, further consolidated the position of the dissidents.²⁵ However, the conflict and dissension within the Communist Party, as these were perceived by the general masses who were either tacit supporters of communism or non-communists brought to surface some basic discrepancies in the communist experiment in our country. Commenting on the present crisis of the party a newspaper article resented that:

"During the last two decades the ups and downs in the world system have remarkably enriched the political consciousness of the social classes. At one level, they have moulded the psyche of the struggling masses with the ideology of the working class. At another level, a large section of the petit bourgeois people too have been inspired by the same ideology, and have taken part in the socialist and communist movements. Some of the latter have even assumed the leadership of these movements. In other words, amidst the rapidly changing social conditions a number of people from the non-labouring class which is still bound up with the ideology of the degenerating social framework have held the authority of the party of the working class. Due to the presence of these elements reformism and parochialism are going hand in hand in the organized revolutionary movement guided by the socialist ideology. In their course of progress these two groups are sometimes united and sometimes they are divided. They

²⁴ *Hindustan Standard*, April 17, 1964

²⁵ Sengupta Amalendu: *Joarbhathay Sath Sattar* (The Tides of The Sixties and The Seventies), Kolkata, 1997

have legitimized their principle sometimes by nationalist aspiration and sometimes by broader international ambition. These trends have also reflected in the communist movement of our country. Hence at one juncture it has become 'leftist' and at another juncture it has become 'rightist'. Sometimes to cement the national unity it has propagated 'the Congress-League' alliance. At another moment, it has urged for gunshots for the final bid for power. And yet at another point of time, it seemed to have been morally convinced by the *bhoodan* movement.

Those who are advocating an alternative party structure today, share the same attitude. It has been customary in the Communist Party to identify a few individuals at particular junctures, and to stigmatize them for causing all the deviations and mistakes that have occurred in the party, and to wash out all other responsibilities. Such imprudence has invariably taken toll upon the struggling masses and the common cadres of the country.

...Now the practice of theoretical and factual analysis over various issues and problems is virtually absent in the party. Marxism which is essentially a guideline far from being a fanatical and orthodox doctrine, is being treated as a set of a priori decisions and imposed without scrutiny or criticism. Even when some discussions are made these are nothing more than scandalizing the opposition. I am not branding one group for making such practice. Both of them are equally responsible.

...Over time and again, because of this lack of insight, the party leaders have disgraced themselves, and disgraced the ideas and practice of the communist movement in the eyes of the people."²⁶

Another 'common man's assessment' which was not so pessimistic about the ideological content of the inner party crisis too was still not fully convinced about the prospect of division. In an article in the same newspaper Jibanlal Bandyopadhyay made a search in the ideological urge behind the leftist deviation:

"...This political battle between the leftists and the rightists can be traced since 1960. It means that the political and ideological issues which have provoked this conflict are not new. Since the twentieth congress of the

²⁶ Das Deben. *Bharater Communist Partyte Eikyer Prashne* (On The Question of The Unity of The Communist Party of India), *Dainik Basumati*, July 16, 1964

Soviet Communist Party the differences and disagreement became apparent. ...In other words, this development is integrally connected with the international communist movement. Apart from this, however, as far as the dissension within the Communist Party of India was concerned, there are some reasons which are typically Indian. The CPI since its birth had a lot of confusion about the assessment of the Indian situation, about the adaptation of the ideology and practice of communism to the specific needs of India. It is obvious that the so-called division among the Indian communists – the rightists and the leftists, the pro-Chinese or the pro-Soviet – sprang from a deep-rooted question regarding the assessment of the present condition in India. In approaching this question they differed objectively and fundamentally.

...The leftists are now taking a great risk. All the newspapers are branding them as 'traitors'. A large section of the population is looking to them with suspicion. Their own party members too are propagating them as Chinese agents. In other words, a handful of persons are holding high the banner of revolution against the brute majority of Indian population and all the political parties including the Congress as well as the Communist Party. So we must search the root of this adventurism.

In my opinion, these leftist communists are more concerned with future India than the present conditions of the country. The future which they are contemplating for the country would be a violent phase of revolution and civil war. Their idea is that the end of Nehru leadership would immediately be followed by a spell of blast in the politics of India. They also hope that the marginalization and isolation, which they are suffering from in the present politics of the country would be simply washed out in that imminent crisis of India. In other words, the leftists consider Pandit Nehru as a balancing element in Indian politics. They anticipate that at his departure this balance will be upset, and numerous problems that are now heaped together would slacken and spread like stones all over the country. That is why the leftist communists and their ideological mentor China have identified Nehru as their main target of attack. The leftists allege that the glory of Indian democracy is a fake one. The lofty ideas that, according to them, have gained ground because of the functioning of a stable government. But they give a false picture. In October 1962 when the Chinese forces advanced up to Bombdila they did not design to capture the soil of our country. The real objective of the Chinese Government was to create pressure on Delhi Cabinet through an extensive frontier war and consequently bring the Central Government to a fall. The intimacy between the Chinese and the Pakistan

Governments too can be explained by this logic. Their plan is to baffle the India Government by a twofold pressure, and make a total chaos in the country by bringing the stability and status quo of its democracy to an end. They have planned so, because, according to the assessment of the leftists, the present condition of our country is creating an impediment to the way of revolution."²⁷

But at the same time his suspicion about this revolutionary ambition of the leftist bloc too was not concealed:

"... Yet it seems that a section of the leftists is hesitant in constructing a new party. Why are those leftists feeling so? The reason is simple. If they are able to capture the whole party, they will be in a safe position. On the contrary, if the new party too faces a leftist deviation this would lead to total chaos. Would those neo-leftists form a new party again? So, though the formation of a new party has become an imminent possibility, a dilemma is still there. I suppose that Jyoti Basu and Namboodiripad are holding these strings tightly."²⁸

Obviously the comment not only revealed the confused state of the dissenting leaders but also expressed the popular suspicion about the whole process. Whether this ideological divide was potential enough to restore the revolutionary zeal of the Communist Party became a glaring question even at the popular level.

However, the polarization having been complete, a formal divide soon occurred. The leftist leaders most of whom got release from jail in early '64 tried to revive their older prominence in the local committees which had been in the meantime made ineffective by the Central leadership. Failing to do so, 32 members of the National Council of the Party walked out of a meeting on 11.04.64 and arranged a convention with

²⁷ Bandyopadhyay Jibanalal: *Bharater Communist Party – Ei Antardwandwer Rahasya Ki* (What Is The Secret of This Internal Dissension of The Communist Party of India), *Dainik Basumatī*, April 19-20, 1964

²⁸ Das Deben: *Bharater Communist Partyte Aikyer Prashne*, *Dainik Basumatī*, July 16, 1964

146 delegates from all over India at Tenali in Andhra during July 7-11, 1964. Hereafter, they met at Calcutta in November 1964. To legitimize their position as the true representatives of the Indian Communist Party they termed this meeting as the Seventh Party Congress. The old party name and banner were also retained. However, soon after the Congress the defected section named itself the C.P.I.(M) and adopted a new election symbol.²⁹

Two Parties: Two Programmes

Once the split was formalized the two parties were now required to state their positions clearly in the perspective of the nationalist politics. The two parties presented their programmes. The leftist section in its Calcutta session preached an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist, anti-monopoly, democratic revolution.³⁰ This revolution would aim at carrying out radical agrarian reforms in the interests of the peasantry and sweeping away the remnants of feudal and semi-feudal fetters on the production forces of agriculture as well as of industry. The social maladies of the feudal structure such as the caste system which kept the Indian villages tied to age-old backwardness too should be removed. Another urgent task of the democratic revolution would be the total eradication of the foreign monopoly capital from the national economy, and to free the economic, political and social life of the people from all its disastrous influences. So, instead of the traditional bourgeois led democratic revolution which marked the triumph of capitalism over feudalism this communist

²⁹ Basu Jyoti: *Jatadur Mone Pore & Dasgupta Sudhangshu: Andaman Jail Theke Communist Partyte*

³⁰ Programme Of the Communist Party of India – adopted by the Seventh Congress held in Calcutta, October 31-November 7, 1964, *Documents of the Communist Movement in India* Vol.-X-B]

planned democratic revolution would go against the bourgeoisie themselves. This revolutionary programme identified as class enemies the big bourgeoisie which, on the one hand, allying with the feudal elements and, on the other hand, collaborating with foreign finance capital built the edifice of political and economic exploitation in India.

Naturally this democratic revolution would be carried out by the proletariat. The leftists envisaged a people's front which should be forged by the firm alliance of the working class with the peasantry. Along with these two core elements some other social groups too were included within the front. Actually all the social classes were sectionalized and some sections due to greater degree of revolutionary potentiality than the others were considered as partners in the people's front. Even the peasantry was not looked upon as a homogenous class. The agricultural labourers and poor peasants, subjected to ruthless exploitation, by their very class position were considered as the allies of the working class. The middle peasantry too was considered so affected by the landlord domination and the capitalist market as to become the reliable allies in the democratic front. Another influential section of the peasantry was formed by the rich peasants who were alleged to have a vacillating mentality and, therefore, should be carefully treated. The Congress agrarian reforms had benefited certain sections of them, and the leftist communists identified among them the aspiration to join the ranks of capitalist landlords. Again, in view of their engaging agricultural labour on hire for work in their farms, they entertained hostility to the agrarian proletariat. Nevertheless, heavy taxation, high prices for industrial goods and inflation, constantly harassed them to make their future uncertain. Subjected to the ravages of the market under the grip of the monopolist traders, both foreign and Indian, they often came up against the oppressive policies pursued by the bourgeois-

landlord government. By and large, therefore, they were expected to be brought into the democratic front and retained as allies in the people's democratic revolution. In the same way, the middle classes as victims of unemployment, inadequate salaries, increasing cost of living, high prices suffered heavily under the capitalist-landlord rule and had the possibility to be a part of the democratic front. The Communist Party was directed to make every effort to win it for the revolution.

Following this norm even the bourgeoisie as a whole was not branded as the class enemy. Rather the internal complexities of this class were taken into account. The bourgeoisie had its conflicts and contradictions with imperialism and also with the feudal and semi-feudal agrarian order. The big bourgeoisie and the monopolists who had close links with foreign monopolists as well as native landlords were firmly opposed to the people's democratic front and its revolutionary objectives. So, this was the section against which the struggle of the Communist Party and its front was directed. But the other broader sections of the nationalist bourgeoisie which had no link with the foreign monopolists but rather suffered at the unsympathetic attitude of the big bourgeoisie were expected to be interested in the accomplishment of the anti-feudal anti-democratic revolution. However, they were sharing state power along with the big bourgeoisie, and exhibited extreme vacillation between the imperialists and their Indian big bourgeois accomplices on the one hand and the people's democratic front on the other. The Communist Party, therefore, decided to utilize every occasion of conflict and contradiction between the nationalist bourgeoisie and the monopolists to win the former to the democratic front.

The highly applauded foreign policy of Nehru regime too, according to this radical group, reflected the class character of this government. This group argued that, unlike the monopolist bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries, the Indian bourgeoisie

for its very development needed world peace and hence was opposed to world war. In a world sharply divided between the war camp of imperialism and the peace camp of socialism the Government of India embarked upon the policy of neutrality or non-alignment to defend and safeguard the newly won political independence and to advance its own class interests. The radicals referred to a number of international happenings and the response of India as a non-aligned country to them to prove the non-alignment as a bourgeois principle. Their argument was that in the early years after independence when the Indian bourgeoisie looked to the US capitalists for their industrial development and when they had faith in the invincibility of the US arms they pressured the Government of India to lean on the imperialist camp. The permission to the British imperialists to recruit the *Gurkha* soldiers for the suppression of the Malayan War of Independence, the granting of facilities to the French imperialist planes in Indian airbases on their way to fight against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the despatch of help to the American troops in Korea, the hesitation to accept the aid for industrial development that was offered by the Soviet Union, according to the radicals, were clear indications of this trend. Later the debacle of the imperialist arms in Korea and Vietnam, the growth of the economic and military might of the socialist world and the breaking of US monopoly in nuclear weapons, the new upsurge in the liberation struggle in Asia and Africa altered the balance of power in favour of socialism, peace and national independence; and consequently compelled the Indian bourgeoisie to negotiate with the world socialist force.

On the basis of this assessment of the present Indian state and social classes the CPI(M) chalked out the programme of the people's democratic revolution. This revolutionary programme aimed at dislodging the present ruling class and establishing a new democratic state and government based on

the firm alliance between the working class and the peasantry. But while this anti-state movement required a vigorous and prolonged social and ideological struggle, the party also decided to utilize all the opportunities to form interim governments to carry out a modest programme of giving immediate relief to the people. The party knew that such measures would not solve the economic and political problems of the nation in any fundamental manner. Yet, it expected that the formation of such governments would give great fillip to the revolutionary movement of the working people and thus help the process of building the democratic front. The party would utilize these limited achievements to free the masses from the bourgeois ideology and arouse popular consciousness about scientific socialism. Thus by combining parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of struggle the Communist Party hoped to develop a powerful mass movement to achieve its revolutionary objective.

Within a few days of the Calcutta Congress of the defected group declaring its policy, the revisionist Dange group adopted its programme in its Bombay session.³¹

Instead of the idea of the People's Democratic Revolution, professed by the breakaway group, this faction upheld the programme of the National Democratic Revolution. Interestingly, the idea of the National Democratic Revolution too was blended with the same anti-feudal, anti-monopoly programme – an objective that the People's Democratic Revolution too attempted to achieve.

³¹ *Programme of the CPI – Documents adopted by the Seventh Party Congress in Bombay, in 1964*, New Delhi, 1965

Collected from the *Proceedings of the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of India* (Bombay, December 13-23, 1964)

However, the difference between these two terms was not just in expression but was basic. To explain this difference Rajeshwar Rao, the former General Secretary of the CPI, pointed out the CPI's stand about the Indian state and social classes.³² He argued that in the CPI's programme the state was viewed as the organ of the class rule of the national bourgeoisie as a whole, in which the big bourgeoisie held powerful influence. This class had strong links with the landlords. These factors gave rise to reactionary pulls on the state-power. So, while the CPI(M) programme characterized the present Indian state as a bourgeois-landlord state led by the big bourgeoisie, the CPI viewed this state as one of the entire bourgeoisie in which the big bourgeoisie held powerful influence and had the landlords as ally. Rao argued that though both of the programmes indicated the involvement of the same classes in structuring the two states, there was a subtle distinction in the two characterizations. The CPI, despite recognizing the influential position of the big bourgeoisie, was not ready to identify it as the leading force behind the present Indian state. This difference of opinion arose out of the positive assessment of the governmental policy in both internal and foreign affairs. The heavy industrialization, and the nationalization of key sectors of industries and finance like Bank, Airlines, according to the rightists, marked the growth towards a self-reliant economy in the post-colonial period. Besides, the Constitution of India was believed to have provided for a parliamentary democracy based on adult franchise and certain fundamental rights for the people and directive principles for the state. These rights, despite limitations, could be made the platform and instrument of struggle of the people for enlarging democracy and defending their interests.

³² Rao C. Rajeshwar: *CPI(M)'s Distortions of CPI Programme Positions*

Collected from Rao C. Rajeshwar, Sinha Indradeep, Reddi N., Sarkar Jagannath: *CPI's Struggle for Communist Unity*, Communist Party of India, New Delhi, 1985

In the same way, a foreign policy based on non-alignment and friendship with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries too was considered as essentially anti-imperialist. The CPI's argument was that if the big bourgeoisie which was reactionary held sway over the state the Indian state could not pursue such progressive policies. Thus, while the CPI(M) disqualified the economic reforms of the bourgeois-led Government as well as its anti-imperialist programme in foreign policy as incomplete and illusory, the rightists counted them as genuine manifestations of progressive outlook.

The CPI, therefore, visualized a broad National Democratic Front bringing together all the patriotic forces of the country, viz, the working class, the entire peasantry, including the rich peasants and agricultural labourers, the intelligentsia and the bulk of the non-monopolist bourgeoisie. This National Democratic Front when it would come to power promised to change the existing pattern of socio-economic order and set the stage for socialist reconstruction. The final aim of the CPI was the socialist reconstruction of society. The political substance of socialism was a statecraft led by the working class, while its economic essence consisted of the socialization of private property in the means of production and exchange. But the essential prerequisite for such a social revolution was the existence of an organized working class, united under the leadership of its party and firmly committed to scientific socialism. The rest of the working people, mainly the peasant masses, had to be bound by an alliance with the working class through a series of common struggles against imperialism, feudalism and the indigenous capitalist class.

But those conditions, according to the CPI leaders, were not fulfilled in the present objective situation of India. The working class was not united; its allegiance was divided between the national bourgeois party, petty bourgeois nationalist parties

and the Communist Party. The peasantry was similarly divided. They could not be united for the immediate abolition of private property in all the means of production and exchange, and for the exclusive power of the working class. Their immediate demand was for land reform and agricultural progress. The subjective desire of any party could not make up for this lag by itself without passing through a transitional period. The national democracy was this transitional phase of struggle for the implementation of the non-capitalist path of development, economically, politically and culturally both from above (i.e., through the state power) and from below (i.e., mass action) to reach the goal of scientific socialism. To talk of people's democracy which was the true form of socialism, according to the leftist writers, was "to skip-over the intermediate stage dictated by objective and subjective factors. It is like putting the cart before the horse."³³

A Critique of Two Programmes

The presentation of two sets of programmes by the two rival Communist Parties, however, could not clear up the ideological confusions. Bhupesh Gupta of the CPI who had been assigned by the party to assess the merits and demerits of the two draft programmes found in both of them distractions from the classical Marxist ideology. He stressed on two points as the categorical imperative for socialism:

1) Conquest of power by the working people and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat in one form or another.

³³ Sen Bhowani: India and the National Democratic Front

Collected from Sen Bhowani and Sen Mohit: National Democracy and People's Democracy- Essays in Honour of Nineteenth Birthday of Comrade Georgi Dimitrov, New Delhi, 1972

2) The leadership of the working class and a Marxist-Leninist Party.

The CPI laid stress on the achievement of power by the working people. But this, according to Gupta, was only a vague reference to the establishment of a proletarian statehood. He warned that in a programmatic document a fundamental question of principle should not be treated in this manner because it might create confusion about the ideological bearing of the communist programme and that of the socialist clauses of other parties like the Congress. Besides, the draft emphasized on some prerequisites for putting the country on the road to socialism and defined this preparatory stage as non-capitalist path of development. But the 'prerequisites' were not clarified. In other words, the commentator criticized the programme for its loose formation that might lead to its reformist distortion.

The critique, therefore, identified two main points of weakness in the draft programme of the older Communist Party. First, it ignored the question of breaking the monopoly of political power of the bourgeoisie and dislodging it from its present exclusive control of the state. Secondly, it did not clearly state the position of the working class in the newly formed state. But the national democracy required fulfilling two criteria. On the one hand, the balance of power should shift in favour of the democratic front. On the other hand, within the front also the balance of power should decisively shift in favour of the working class, though it did not necessarily mean the leadership of the working class. Thus though the draft assured the state of national democracy to be qualitatively different from the present state, it left the idea about the ways and means of this qualitative transformation incomplete. As a result, the whole concept of national democratic front remained vulnerable to reformist interpretation.

If the CPI programme was exposed to revisionist invasion the left draft too was disapproved of because of its susceptibility to ultra radicalism in violation of the international guideline for the communist movement set by the Moscow Documents. The concept of the National Democratic Front framed by the Moscow Documents and accepted by the CPI linked up the working class struggle with the broad democratic movement, and thus created the space for a united struggle of all democratic forces against the forces of reaction within and outside the country. The left strategy of the People's Democratic Front, on the other hand, nullified the prospect of such a wide network of alliance for the working class. It truly emphasized the vacillating nature of the bourgeoisie but it did not take into account their positive role in anti-imperialist struggle. Thus by ignoring the bourgeoisie and in the name of formulating a radical programme of struggle it practically gave birth to a sectarian strategy. And this was done at a time when the unity of all democratic forces was an urgent necessity to fight imperialism, neo-colonialism and domestic reaction. So, the left alternative was alleged not only to have repudiated the Moscow line but also to have failed to respond to the need of the hour.³⁴

Indeed, the limitations in the programmes of both of the Communist Parties arose out of a common dilemma from which the communist movement had been suffering from the beginning. Despite continuous references to the ideological differences, the two programmes had some striking similarities. The organization of a revolutionary mass movement to achieve the socialist aim was a common premise in both of the programmes. Again, both parties upheld an electoral programme with the objective of immediate relief. The Dangeites, alike their

³⁴ Gupta Bhupesh: Comments on the Two Draft Programmes, New Delhi, 1964

opponents, believed that by winning a stable majority in the parliament it was possible to use this constitutional instrument to execute popular will. However, the Dangeites also shared the apprehension of the CPI(M) leaders that the ruling classes would not relinquish their power voluntarily, and thought it necessary for the revolutionary forces to get prepared to face all the shifts and turns in the political life of the country. The basic difference of the Dangeites from the defected group, therefore, lay in selecting the allies of the working class to form the united front for revolutionary action. Still the difference was substantial. It arose out of variation in the assessment of the progressive quality of the Indian state and the revolutionary potentiality of each of the social classes.

But none of these groups could resolve the dichotomy of concentrating on immediate electoral gains and aspiring for a far-off revolutionary objective. Their difference lay in the fact that the two groups prescribed two different strategies for balancing electoral activities with revolutionary aspirations. But in the ultimate analysis both of them became parts of electoral politics and had the risk of being branded as revisionists. This actually happened when a few years later a radical challenge was mounted against electoral experiments and brought all factions of the Communist Party into another trial of legitimacy.

Chapter - V

Communists in Power-An Experiment in Constitutionalism (1964-1971)

Resurgence of Militant Populism

Once the internal schism within the divided party was settled, the communists in the two main party outfits resumed their role as the rival vanguards of the struggling masses. The occasions for mass movement too were created by the rise of tram fare, the price hike of essential commodities, the demand for the release of political prisoners most of whom were communists and were detained for indefinite period in the name of maintaining national security, and a general complaint about governmental injustice and oppression by the Congress regime. The massive popular protest, by way of strikes, demonstrations, and violent clashes between the police and the angry mobs in 1964-66, took an organized shape when labourers, government officers, teachers and various other groups formed a common base of struggle called the 12th July Committee.¹

The militant populism reached its height, however, with the resurgence of a severe food crisis in 1964-66. The demographic pressure due to the constant inflow of the refugees from East Pakistan coincided with rampant hoarding by a section of *jotedars* and rice mill owners. Prafulla Chandra Sen as the food minister a decade ago identified speculative trading and stockholding as the two major sources of the food crisis.² Yet,

¹ Annual Police Report 1965

I.B. Records, Serial No. 255/1928

² West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings: Seventeenth Session (June-July 1957)

as the Chief Minister he failed to cope with these evil forces, while facing another spell of food crisis in the 1960s. The protective measures taken by the Government like cordoning, price control, monopoly over rice trade proved to be totally inadequate. Failing to offer an administrative and political solution to a difficult problem, the Government resorted to a policy of repressing popular demand. Detention without trial, torture at police lock-up, police raid in residential areas and even indiscriminate firing on public agitation became everyday experience of the people. Naturally popular discontent mounted among different sections of the population and the communists acted to mould this discontent into an anti-establishment uprising. Jyoti Basu in his memoirs recorded the mood of the Government approach and the popular response to it:

“The unsuccessful food policy of the Congress Government dragged West Bengal and many other parts of the country into a severe spell of crisis. Food deficit and exorbitant rise in the price of food grains affected the whole country. Rationing system was facing total breakdown. It was obvious that without a fundamental change in the Governmental policy the problem could not be solved. But the Government without changing its policy began to oppress the people. Those who raised the voice of protest against the unjust policy of the Government faced severe repression, as the Government indiscriminately resorted to such measures of suppression like beating, firing, hurling tear gas. ...Not only the supporters of the Communist Party but many common people too were victimized. Yet, the Congress Government could not mitigate the militancy of the masses. On 22nd and 23rd of September in 1966 a 48-hour strike called collectively by the leftist parties and the trade unions became a massive success in West Bengal. A huge wave of mass agitation burst upon at the demand of the resignation of the Congress Government in the state.”³

³ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 114-115

The two Communist Parties, along with other leftist groups like the RSP, SUC, RCPI made a common cause against the injustice of the Congress Government and thus could transform popular anger into a political outburst.⁴

Coalition Politics and Electoral Victory

No sooner had the turbulence subsided, the preparation for election began in 1967. The Elections of 1967 set its pulse on the emergence of a new contender, i.e., the Bangla Congress. This breakaway group from the Congress not only gave a severe blow to the unity of the Congress Party in the state but also swept away a large section of the vote bank of the Congress. The political alliances, which the communists had formed to experiment with militant mass politics, were now utilized to fight electoral battles. Consequently two communist fronts emerged. One was the People's United Left Front (PULF) led by the CPI and the other was the United Left Front (ULF) led by the CPI(M). They emerged as the solid contestants to the Congress, the party of establishment.

The most significant anti-Congress force in the Elections of 1967 was the Bangla Congress. It chose to ally with the communist fronts. On the eve of the Elections of 1967 an alternative political force capable of challenging the Congress domination managed to consolidate. This coalition force with the communists as a major component in it made possible the first non-Congress Government in the state since independence. Singly the Congress won 127 seats. But it was beaten by a coalition of ULF and PULF that gained 133 seats. Within the

⁴ Annual Police Report 1965
I.B. Records, Serial No. 255/1928

coalition the CPI(M) achieved the largest number of seats with a total of 44 seats; the CPI won 16 seats and the Bangla Congress⁵ won 34 seats. But the most interesting feature of these electoral gains was that the Congress was able to secure only 676267 additional votes compared to the Elections of 1962. The two Communist Parties gained a total of 801802 additional votes but the Bangla Congress secured a whopping total of 1325013, i.e., almost 42% of the additional votes cast in the 1967 elections.⁶

In other words, the Communist Parties following the principle of broad based democratic unity solidified an alternative force to the Congress.

The UF Government of 1967 was formed by a coalition of 14 parties and an Independent including all of the parties in the two Communist-led electoral fronts along with the Gurkha

⁵ The Bangla Congress was a breakaway group from the Congress. Since the death of B. C. Roy in July 1962 the Congress Party in West Bengal was facing an internal crisis due to factional conflicts and personal rivalries among its top-level leaders. Ajoy Mukherjee, the President of the Provincial Congress Committee in West Bengal and Prafulla Sen whom the party selected as the successor of B. C. Roy in the Chief Ministership were totally antagonistic to each other. Atulya Ghosh who held the most influential position in the party's organization too was sharply opposed to Ajoy Mukherjee. Accusation and counter-accusation of corruption in financial and organizational sectors marred the unity of the party and resulted in the exclusion of Ajoy Mukherjee from the party. Subsequently, in June 1966 Ajoy Mukherjee along with a few other ex-Congressmen like Satis Samanta, Sushil Dhara, Rajani Pramanik, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh formed a new party called the Bangla Congress. This was a severe blow to the Congress Party because it weakened the party's mass base and caused a heavy loss in its vote bank. However, the makers of the new party, despite their difference from the Congressmen on some moral and organizational issues, did not have an alternative framework of state and society, and basically carried the ideological legacy of the Congress. (Sengupta Amalendu: *Joarbhnnathay Sath Sattar*)

⁶ *Election Results of West Bengal Statistics and Analysis*
Communist Party of India (Marxist) West Bengal State Committee

League, the Lok Sevak Sangha and the Praja Socialist Party. The UF Government fell apart in nine months. However, all but one of the parties that took part in the UF Government of 1967 again was able to coalesce against the Congress in 1969 Elections. Again a decisive victory came for the UF. The Congress secured only one-fourth of the seats the UF won (219 for the UF and 55 for the Congress).

The communists were assigned some important portfolios in the UF Government. Jyoti Basu became the Deputy Chief Minister in charge of Finance and Transport. Harekrishna Konar was installed in the Department of Land and Land Revenue. Niranjana Sengupta was given the charge of Refugee Rehabilitation and Relief. Somnath Lahiri and Bishwanath Mukherjee of the CPI were given the ministries of Information, and Irrigation and waterways respectively. The chair of the Chief Minister was, however, held by Ajoy Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress.⁷

The UF Government: Prospects and Problems

The communists now being a part of the ruling establishment had to carve out a new role for themselves. On the one hand, they had to fulfil the expectation of the masses to whom they had so far promised a society without inequality and an economy without exploitation. On the other hand, they had to conform to the norms of coalition politics and the constitutional proprieties of an essentially parliamentary regime. The communists faced three major problems in achieving their ends under the UF Government. In the first place, it was necessary to maintain collaboration with their political partners who did not always see eye to eye with the communists in the

⁷ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

formulation of policies and programmes. Secondly, empowerment through constitutional means did not permit any revolutionary move to topple that constitution. Finally, even the limited schemes of reforms within a constitutional framework were impeded by constant intervention by the Central Government in the affairs of the state. The allocation of power between the Centre and the states in the pseudo-federal polity in India had created conditions in which the independent initiatives by the states were virtually paralyzed. This authoritarianism of the Centre was considered as a major obstacle in the way of fulfilment of the democratic objectives of the UF Government.

The Communist Parties, however, endeavoured to make people aware as well as tolerant of these limitations of the UF Government. A communist theoretician with the CPI links made a critical assessment of the electoral success of the United Front:

“The UF and the UF Government are not the same things. The former is a revolutionary organization. The latter has to perform in a constitutional framework and, therefore, has to put a limit to its revolutionary programme. The UF can give a call for a revolutionary power structure. But the UF Government, while bringing any political change, has to maintain allegiance to the existing constitutional framework. The UF is not bound by any limit. But the power of the UF Government is limited.”⁸

However, even this limited power was not without effect. Therefore, in a CPI publication on the eve of the election a call was given for the “unity of the left parties for joint action” “on the basis of a minimum democratic common platform”. It was expected that this

⁸ Kabiraj Narahari: Pashchimbanke Yuktafront Sarkar Gathaner Rajnaitik Tatparya (The Political Significance of the Foundation of The United Front Government) (*Sharadiya Kaikantar*, Kolkata, published in the year 1375 in the Bengali calendar), pp. 103-104

kind of united action would “generate such confidence among the masses, including the masses behind the Congress and other democratic forces, to come forward not only to give an effective challenge to the Congress but also at the same time defeat the manoeuvres of extreme reaction.”⁹

Jyoti Basu who represented the other communist block also admitted the limitations in the applicability of the communist ideas in a coalition government within the existing constitutional framework. However, he too was equally optimistic about the potentialities of the limited power. During the election campaign Jyoti Basu declared:

“We do not want to deceive people. The alternative government would not change the situation fundamentally. For it, the existing power structure of the entire country needs to be changed. This process would have started from this election.

The leftist coalition-led Government would be distinguished from the earlier Congress Government by its active assistance to sustain, encourage as well as spread the democratic mass movements against the vested interests. The police atrocities over the genuinely popular movements should be stopped. The elected representatives should formulate their administrative policy in response to the demands raised by the anti-Congress movement.”¹⁰

The UF Government: Ideas and Programmes

i) Land and Food Policy

With these constraints and limited expectations the UF Government adopted an 18-point programme. This programme too reflected a ‘democratic spirit’ without any radical tone.¹¹ The foremost task of the UF Government was to solve the chronic food crisis. It was not only an economic issue but

⁹ Rao C. Rajeshwar: For a Left Alternative to the Congress-*New Age* (Weekly)-August 15, 1965

¹⁰ *Ganashakti*, January 13, 1967

¹¹ See Appendix

involved a number of ideological, political and constitutional questions. Throughout the Congress regime the Communist Parties explained the recurrent phenomena of food crisis not in terms of any major decline in production but by an argument of the unfair distribution of food grains. The communists also accused the successive Congress Governments of its indifference to this issue of malpractice in distribution of food grains.

The responsibility, therefore, fell upon the Communist Parties in power to solve this problem through a fundamental alteration of the existing pattern of land rights and agrarian relations that allowed concentration of land and hoarding. The existing pattern of the Centre-state relations too needed to be changed because the 'discriminatory' and 'autocratic attitude' of the Centre in the allocation of resources among the states was considered responsible for the economic distress of the people of West Bengal. As far as land reforms were concerned, the Congress Government had taken some legislative measures in the 1950s and '60s.¹² But the rule of ceiling was often violated through trickery. One of such tricks was *benami* (camouflaging

¹² The Congress regime of the State after independence made a few legislations to implement land reform. These were

i) Estate Acquisition Act (1953) passed by the West Bengal Legislative Assembly along with the two Constitutional Amendments in 1951 and 1955 that resulted in the abolition of the *zamindari* system

ii) An Ordinance of 1954 that tended to stop the indiscriminate eviction of the tenants from land by enabling the tenants to appeal to the SDOs

iii) The imposition of a ceiling on landholding. In West Bengal the limit to landholding was fixed at 25 acres. However, the ceilings were imposed on individuals and not on family holdings enabling landowners to divide up their holdings 'notionally' in the names of relatives merely to avoid the ceiling. Besides, plantation, fisheries were exempted from ceiling. (Chandra Bipan, Mukherjee Aditya, Mukherjee Mridula: *India After Independence* & Bhattacharya Jayanta: *Pashchimanga: Jamir Andolan O Bhumi Sanska* (Land Movement and Land Reform in West Bengal), Kolkata, 2003)

the real name) transfer that included transfer of land titles to relatives, holding of agricultural land as fisheries or tea garden, which was excluded from this ceiling. The official history of the Indian National Congress too admitted the little success of the acts to bring any effective change in the land structure:

“The basic flaw in the ceiling enactments, and what are described as failures of implementation due to lack of political will, arose because the two questions, viz., who can ‘own’ land? and how much land can he ‘own’?, were treated as two separate questions. The former is decided by the tenancy or land-reform legislations of the early fifties; the latter by the ceilings legislations of the sixties. In the context of the distributive objectives of the ceilings, the latter question is meaningful only in the context of an appropriate definition of personal cultivation. Once this is decided, the question of the maximum limit becomes only a technical one of limited usefulness. In the context of the land reform legislation that permitted absentee cultivation by giving a very liberal definition of personal cultivation, it now appears that even the expectation that ceilings would redistribute land in favour of the small and marginal farmers was a futile one. Land distribution has certainly taken place in that there are, technically speaking, no holdings above the maximum limits prescribed and the average size of holding is lower than it used to be. However, the structure remained unchanged since then. The distribution of land and cultivation since 1950/51 has remained unchanged in the ratio of 35:65 for land and 65:35 for number of cultivators between two groups owning less than 10 acres and more than 18 acres respectively.”¹³

In the UF Government the CPI(M) member being the Land and Land Revenue Minister these wrongs were expected to be rectified. Harekrishna Konar on behalf of the Government undertook a scheme of forceful occupation of illegal holdings and their transfer to the landless peasants. Three categories of land were targeted: a) vested land which had been illegally retained by the *zamindars* b) land which had not yet been vested

¹³ Pande B. N. ed.: A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress, Vol.-IV. 1947-1964, All India Congress Committee, New Dehi, 1990, pp. 296-297

but which could be transformed into vested land c) *benami* holdings.¹⁴ Along with the forceful occupation of illegal holdings the arbitrary eviction of the sharecroppers too was strongly resisted.

A marked feature of this land policy was that the popular initiative was encouraged and the government's machinery only tended to approve what had been accomplished by the peasants themselves. A number of Land Advisory Committees were organized by various peasant groups to probe into the situation and to detect the cases of anomalies. Thus the UF government not only gave the peasants a new language of protest but also made the administration an instrument of struggle. Land Revenue Minister Harekrishna Konar emphasized these twofold achievements of the UF land policy. The first one was:

"A study of the recent peasant movement shows that though the Government has helped a lot, the poor peasants with their self-initiative have created this situation and partially fulfilled their demands. Experience has shown that it is a wrong assumption that people would remain inactive and the Government would impose a welfare policy from above. On the other hand, it was not possible to create the present situation through mass struggle alone by totally neglecting the positive aspects of the policies of the UF Government or by ignoring the collective effort to protect the UF Government from a reactionary conspiracy."¹⁵

The second one was:

"Whatever might have been the limitations of the UF Government, it tried to extract the illegal lands held by the *jotedars* and *zamindars* as well

¹⁴ *Benami* holding is a kind of land, which the owner enjoys all but in name. It is usually a tricky measure followed by the real owner of a tract of land who preserves this land in the name of others.

¹⁵ Krishak Andolaner Natan Gatidhara O Tar Tatparya (New Course of The Peasant Movement and Its Significance)
Collected from Konar Harekrishna: *Nirbachita Rachana Sankalan* (Selected Works), Kolkata, 1978, p. 31

as to distribute the Government land among the peasants. The success of the Government, in terms of the amount of land seized, was not very impressive. Yet, through this very limited effort it could invoke the bitter memories of the landless, toiling peasants about their ageless deprivation and oppression. During our brief tenure we could distribute merely 2 *lakhs* 32 thousand acres of land. This 2 and ½ *lakhs* acre of land in respect of the demand of the 1 and ½ *crores* of impoverished peasants in Bengal was no more than a drop of water in a vast sea. This could not solve the problem of land hunger. But this could create an urge among the peasants to have a piece of land and inspired them to raise a fiery struggle for a just cause. This awakening of the peasant masses has uprooted the Congress from the soil of rural Bengal. The people of Bengal, while bringing the United Front to power, have also conferred upon it the responsibility to sustain the land question in the state.”¹⁶

The old agenda of the communists for a joint struggle of the peasants and the other exploited classes too was revived. In a convention of the CPI(M)’s peasant wing – Krishaksabha – the agrarian programme of the party included this point:

“Though the fundamental change in the land structure, prescribed to save our society from crisis, is demanded primarily by the peasants, such an ambition can be fulfilled only through the collective effort of the peasants and agrarian labourers with the other struggling masses ..., especially the working class. It is necessary to create a close alliance between these two classes of primary producers as well as of genuine fighters.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Shosoner Biruddhe Gana-Jagaran (Popular Awakening against Exploitation) – Speech in the Legislative Assembly, March 18, 1969

Collected from Konar Harekrishna: *Bharater Krishu Samasya* (Agrarian Question in India), Kolkata, 1994, pp. 66-67

¹⁷ Pashchimabanga Pradeshik Krishak Sammelan (Provincial Peasant Conference in West Bengal) – Report of 19th Conference (May-June, 1968) at Sonarpur, 24 Parganas

Collected from Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishak Sabhar Lakshya O Niti* (Objectives and Principles of Krishak Sabha) (Pashchimabanga Pradeshik Krishaksabha, Kolkata, 1976), p. 199

The limitations of these measures were, however, too many. The Land Revenue Minister himself admitted the failures or the limited achievements of his projects. Landowners were too tricky to be brought under legal restrictions and the peasants were too unorganized to harness the legal and popular forces against the widespread network of exploitation. The police forces too in many areas violating the will and instructions of the Land and Land Revenue Department were allegedly favouring the landowners in actual fields of action. Even after forcible occupation only a minute fraction of illegal holding could be finally reclaimed by court orders and distributed among the landless peasants. Till March 1969, the Department of Land Records and Surveys detected 150000 acres of *benami* land. But not more than 25% of it could be acquired by the state. In tea gardens also out of 39400 acres of excess land only 20731 acres could be recovered. The legal process was extremely slow, complicated and could be skilfully dragged by the large landowners in their favour. The legislative measures framed within a bourgeois system seemed to have a tacit sympathy for the class interests of the landed magnates.¹⁸

Even the limited process too was halted after the toppling of the first UF Government within a few months after its formation. The land advisory committees which the first UF Government had built up with peasant representatives also lost their effectiveness. When the brief tenure of the first UF Government was terminated the membership in most of the

¹⁸ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Forty-Fifth Session (June-July, 1967)

committees was thoroughly reshuffled. As a result, their basic purpose was defeated. During the second regime of the UF there was no other way but to dismantle those committees.¹⁹

The most acute controversy was created on the issue of the modality of food procurement. The CPI(M) MLAs found the only solution in forced procurement from the *jotedars*. The UF Government made a declaration that the families which possessed more than 10 and 12 acres of rice land in irrigated and non-irrigated zones respectively would be brought under the procurement policy. Those families would be allowed to preserve for each of their members 9 *maunds* (a unit of measurement) of paddy annually as subsistence and 2 *maunds* per acre as production cost. The rest of the products should be treated as surplus and that would have to be sold. Those who did not own land would be allowed to keep 50 *maunds* of paddy at maximum. The Government also declared that the surplus products should be sold to the Government only and not to the rice-mills privately. In case of violation of those Government regulations forcible procurement was ordered.²⁰

The real problem, however, lay in implementing those decisions. The administrative apparatus was found hopelessly inadequate. As supplementary bodies local committees were formed by the representatives of different political parties and Government officials. But these were only of limited success.

¹⁹ i) Konar H. K.: West Bengal UF Government's Land Reforms Programme-Policy Statement, *People's Democracy*, March 30, 1969

ii) Konar Harekrishna: Radical Land Reform not Possible by Relying on Government Machinery Alone *People's Democracy*, August 24, 1969

²⁰ *Yugantar*, April 1967

Bishwanath Mukherjee, now a minister of the UF Government and one of the leading protagonists of this food policy, himself admitted the limitations of their programme:

“This was not only a new experiment in West Bengal but also added a new dimension to the Indian democracy. The committees, as they gathered new experiences and served new purposes, were entrusted with greater power and greater responsibilities.

...Though the representatives of the opposition Congress Party too were accommodated into these committees, they did not cooperate with us. So, mainly the partners of the United Front, and also such parties like the Hindu Mahasabha, Janasangha, who remained outside the Front, joined the committees. The process of the formation of the committees was very lengthy. It was also revealed that in many parts of rural Bengal most of the parties of the United Front were either non-existent or extremely weak. So, the committees could not be effective everywhere....”²¹

In this situation by August 1967 the price of rice reached hitherto the highest level in Calcutta and adjoining rationing areas. While the medium quality rice was sold at Rs. 4.20, the fine variety of it could be purchased only at Rs 5 per kg. In the suburban areas also the price of one kg rice was ranged between Rs. 3.50 and Rs. 4.20. Prices during the corresponding period in the previous year were Rs. 2.50 for medium quality rice in Calcutta, Rs. 2.25 in Burdwan and Rs. 1.37 in Murshidabad. Price hike could be noted in other food items also. The wholesale prices of pulses, for example, showed a steep rise in August: *Moog* was Rs. 200 per quintal against Rs. 124 in the previous year and *Masuri* (*moog* and *masuri* are the two variety of pulses) was Rs. 188 per quintal against Rs.110 in the previous year. As

²¹ Mukherjee Bishwanath: Paschimbanglar Khadya Samasya O Yuktafront (Food Problem in West Bengal and the United Front) (*Sharadiya Kalantar*, September 26, 1967), p. 144

for mustard oil, the prices were Rs. 485 per quintal compared to Rs. 398 in the same month of the previous year. Potato was sold at Rs. 93.95 per quintal in the wholesale market against only Rs. 60 in the previous year. The situation worsened as the Government ordered a rice ration cut by 100 grams from 500 grams in statutory rationing areas.

The UF committee formulated a new guideline to take control of the situation. The committee decided that the retail price of rice should be fixed at Rs. 40 per *maund*. The procurement prices of paddy would be the same as before, i. e., Rs. 21, 22 and 23 per *maund* of coarse, medium and fine paddy respectively. The novel feature of the policy was that a bonus of Rs. 2 per *maund* was proposed to be paid to those who would deposit their levied amount to the Government godowns in time. The bonus was also promised to the distressed sellers. Some changes were also proposed in the levy system. It was stated that the levy should be based on the average yield in every zone and it was to be determined by the BDO in consultation with the local food and relief committee.

The appeal to the Centre also failed miserably. Referring to the government source a newspaper report showed that up to the end of July West Bengal received 612800 tons of cereals from the Centre against 964900 tons in the corresponding period of the previous year.²² Saroj Chakrabarti in his memoirs about his days with the Chief Ministers mentioned that on August 11, 1967 Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee had written a long letter to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In this letter the Chief Minister conveyed the proposal of the Cabinet to stage a hunger strike by Bengal Ministers in front of her house to enforce their demand for increased supply of food. She, however, like her father two

²² Hindustan Standard, August 1967

decades ago, denied all charges of negligence and indifference to the cause of West Bengal. Rather in a long reply she surveyed the condition of food supply in the entire country and defended the Central Government in the matter of fixing Bengal's quota in the year of country's worst drought. She wrote:

"With the best will in the world, it is not possible to meet the demands of the States fully. If anything, West Bengal has received a slightly preferential treatment. We had made it clear to the previous State Government that we should not be able to supply more than a *lakh* ton of rice during the year and about 75000 tonnes of wheat and *milo* (a cereal crop) per month. When we met in March, it was mutually agreed that for the remaining months of the year, we would supply 75000 tonnes of wheat and *milo* per month and 15000 tonnes of rice. The actual supplies from January to July amounted to 638000 tonnes. This gives an average of 90000 tonnes a month. Despite the March agreement, we have stepped up supplies of wheat and *milo* from 75000 tonnes to 85000 tonnes in June and 104000 tonnes in July. The Minister of Food and Agriculture has increased the quota for August from 90000 to 95000 tonnes and has promised that more would be allotted if supplies become available.

West Bengal is not the only State, which is asking for more. We should have been supplying 250000 to 300000 tonnes of food grains per month to Bihar as against the demand made by the State Government of 400000 tonnes. However, our average monthly rate of supply has been a little over 200000 shortfall during the last 2 or 3 months of about 30000 tonnes. Other drought affected areas like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujrat and Maharashtra have also been clamouring for higher allocation of food grains.

When food resources are limited, we have to assess relative needs and then fix priorities. We try to do this objectively and without any discrimination whatsoever as between State Governments. If every State Government made preëmtory demands for more grain and then attempted to back these demands by doing "*dharna*" (sitting or lying at one's door imploring something) in Delhi, you can well realise the impossible situation, which would result."²³

²³ Chakrabarti Saroj: With West Bengal Chief Ministers – Memoirs 1962 to 1977, Kolkata, 1978, pp. 253-254

The expectation of relief from the Centre having been dashed to the ground, the UF Government had no other option but to raise resources from within the state. But then the problem arose. Although Ajoy Mukherjee supported the communists' view of an unsympathetic Centre, he did not endorse the communist idea of direct action against those who hoarded food grains. In practice, it meant a frontal attack on landowning classes. But neither P. C. Ghosh who headed the Food Ministry as an independent MLA nor Ajoy Mukherjee and the Bangla Congress would have tolerated such an attack that might politically alienate this powerful social community from the UF Government. On the contrary, the 'class enemies', as they had been identified by the CPI(M), soon appeared as class collaborators of the Bangla Congress. It was this ideological difference between the Bangla Congress and the CPI(M) that in the long run foiled their political alliance was revealed in the writings of Jyoti Basu:

"The food minister did not take any initiative to solve the food problem. He was by no means sincere to the food programme of the United Front and hardly took any administrative action against the hoarders, blackmarketeers and people with vested interests, who created artificial scarcity in the food market. We made repeated appeals to him but without effect. Finally he favoured the reactionary groups.

...Our party was continually demanding the fixation of the price of food grains sold at open market. We particularly demanded the setting of the price of rice at the rate of Rs. 1 and 25 paise. The CPI(M) also protested against the curtailment in rationing, and demanded the immediate arrest of those owners, who amassed 500, 1000, 2000, 3000 and even more maunds of food grains without selling them to the Government, and launched a widespread campaign to shatter the hoarding system. Our party also planned to launch a mass movement to create pressure on the Central Government for sending extra food grains. Besides, we wanted that the Government must let people know the specific causes of the failure of our food policy and ask for their help for the collection and distribution of food grains. But

Prafulla Ghosh, the food minister of our state, turned a deaf ear to all those suggestions. On the contrary, he appealed for the psychological change of the landlords, hoarders and blackmarketeers.

...A section of the police and the bureaucracy too were involved with the anti-government conspiracy.

Some of our political partners in the United Front too were disgruntled by our land reform, as it seriously impaired the vested interests in rural society.”²⁴

The CPI(M) and its radical coalition partners were, therefore, put in a complex situation. They could neither challenge the ineffective food policy without endangering the Coalition Government, nor they had any satisfactory explanation for the public. In this situation the relationship of the communists, particularly the CPI(M), with P.C. Ghosh’s lobby was severely strained.

Thus the futility of the legislative and administrative reforms without bringing a change in the class structure of the state and society was pretty apparent. And that such a wholesome change would not be possible without a revolutionary mass movement was also obvious. Konar admitted:

“It is not possible to uproot the problem of a country by mere land reform without bringing a fundamental change in the structure of land control. The destruction of the last vestige of medieval feudal landlordism and the end of monopoly control of foreign capitalism are the two essential pre-conditions for the emergence of a new political and social system where both agriculture would flourish and the rapid industrialization would open new avenues of employment. I admit that this is not an easy task but requires complete change in social structure.”²⁵

²⁴ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 128-130

²⁵ Debate in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on the Abolition of the *Zamindari* System – Forty-Fifty Session, June-July 1967

Collected from *The West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*

ii) The Refugee Issue

The same experience was repeated in the arena of refugee rehabilitation. Securing civil rights, gainful employment and social justice for the uprooted people of the east on Indian soil had been a long-standing agenda in the programme of the Communist Party and other left forces. The political contribution of the refugees in making the UF a power in the establishment was also hardly deniable. After some casual and unwilling measures, as the communists alleged them to be, the Congress Government virtually closed the chapter of refugee rehabilitation in the early 1960s. By 1961 the relief camps were abolished. The Congress Government sighed in relief in completing the vexed task of rehabilitation. Only some residuary tasks concerning the refugees apparently have remained undone and the Government promised to finish them in near future. The communists vehemently protested against the hasty attempts by the Government to shake off the responsibility.

Naturally it remained a moral obligation on the part of the UF Government to reopen the issue and bring it to a fruitful conclusion. Attempts were made in this direction through the formation of the refugee rehabilitation committee under the presidentship of Samar Mukherjee. This committee demanded Rs 235 *crores* from the Central Government for the completion of the rehabilitation programme. But the process was halted by the premature demise of the UF Government that caused the dispersal of the committee. The Central Government in the following years appointed a review committee which produced a set of working group report. But the committee worked extremely slowly and the Government too responded to its

recommendations in a half-hearted manner.²⁶ In other words, the experience revealed the same constraints which prevented the leftist land policy from being implemented in a bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

iii) Industry and Trade Union

In this situation the significance of the UF Government was assessed “as instruments of struggle in the hands of the people, more than as governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people.”²⁷ However, the idea of ensuring some immediate relief was practised. Certain steps were taken in this direction. A plan for the increase of the salaries of the State Government employees was made. Besides, when the British-owned Calcutta Tramway Company threatened to stop paying its employees if fares were not raised, Jyoti Basu as the Transport Minister brought the Company’s management under the State Government. Thus he helped the tram-company to avoid the unacceptable choice of raising fares. Since both the finance and transport ministries, the two departments, which were directly connected with these reformative measures were in the hands of the CPI(M), the popularity of the communist

²⁶ i) Sengupta Niranjana: Udbastu Samasya O Yuktafront Sarkar (Refugee Problem and the United Front Government)

ii) Bandyopadhyay Gopal: Swadhinatar 50 Bachar Pare Pashchim Banglar Udbastu Samasya (Refugee Problem in West Bengal in Fifty Years after Independence)

Collected from *Smaranika* (Reminiscences) 2000, *Sammilita Kendriya Bastuhara Parishad*, 16th State Conference and Golden Jubilee Festival, Halishahar, 24 Parganas, August 11-13, 2000

²⁷ By *Politburo: Ideological Debate Summed Up* Communist Party of India (Marxist), New Delhi, 1968

bloc as the most progressive group of the UF was raised to a considerable extent. The newspaper reported that the government measure was hailed even by the opposition members from the Congress in both houses of the Assembly as a momentous achievement of the people of West Bengal.²⁸

Democratic concessions without any radical alteration of the capitalist mode of production were also achieved in the trade union sector. Here the position of the communists was more complicated. Unlike in the peasant front where the CPI(M) was the only major party to attempt to form mass organizations on a large scale, most of the other parties of the UF and even the Congress could boast of large membership figures for affiliated trade unions. This had a positive side, as the workers in factories were more politically conscious and organized than their rural counterpart. But on the other hand, the intervention by the other political ideologies made the class politics of the communists to face a competitive bid in the trade union front. As a result, the communists, particularly the CPI(M) which was more aggressive and militant than its counterpart often became involved in clashes even with their partners in the UF Government.

However, the UF regime witnessed a large expansion of trade union activities. Subodh Banerjee of the SUC who was the first UF Labour Minister adopted a new approach that attempted to enlist the people's co-operation instead of depending on the administrative machinery for the

²⁸ *Hindustan Standard*, July 15, 1967

implementation of policies. Instead of reforms from above and the use of administrative forces, public intervention for the settling of industrial disputes was approved. The most significant step in this respect was that *gherao*²⁹ was legalized. Lay off or retrenchment was discouraged. The police were instructed not to interfere in the legitimate and democratic trade union movement.³⁰ Apart from the labourers, the State Government employees as well as the teachers achieved some favourable changes in salary structure at the initiative of the UF Government.³¹

However, just like in agricultural field, in industrial sector as well the implementation of policy was continually being constrained by the compulsions to abide by the parliamentary norms which upheld essentially a capitalist order in economy. As a result, despite intensive politicization of the labourers and the legalization of unionism, the improvement in the industrial relations and the conditions of labour were not quantified impressively. Addressing the Legislative Council Labour Minister Subodh Banerjee supplied some statistical data about the industrial conditions. He told that altogether 1233 persons had been retrenched from different industrial units between March 1 and May 31, 1967. 20 lockouts and 313 cases of *gherao*

²⁹ *Gherao*, as it implies in industrial parlance, is encirclement of a person in authority of an industrial establishment and to keep him confined in a particular room or place by group of workers until he concedes to the demands of the workers of the unit. (Chakrabarti Saroj: *With West Bengal Chief Ministers – Memoirs 1962 to 1977*)

³⁰ *Yugantar*, May 1967

³¹ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

had been reported. During the same time in the previous year under Congress rule 936 persons were retrenched and 19 industrial organizations declared lockout. The Government did not have the record of the number of *gherao*.³² Despite growing militancy in the mood of the labourers and the political sponsorship for intensive trade unionism, the achievement of the workers in real terms, however, was not very impressive. Administrative reforms without political revolution failed to effect a structural change in economy. Even the change of attitude was not always welcome. The leftist militancy was decried by some of its coalition partners as measures to create chaos and disorder in industrial life.³³

The moderate nature of the UF Government was also proved by an open-minded approach to the democratic aspects of the Congress Party and its capitalist allies. The Communist Parties as partners of coalition politics had to follow suit. Thus the communists did not totally disapprove of private investments in industries. Jyoti Basu, the Deputy Chief Minister from the CPI(M), for example, was sympathetic to the Birla group of industries and assessed it as a fair management association, ready to pay reasonable wages to the workers.³⁴ The split within the Congress Party and the emergence of the Indira group with a programme of reform such as the nationalization of 14 major

³² *Hindustan Standard*, July 4, 1967

³³ *Ibid.* June-July, 1967

³⁴ *Ibid.* June 1, 1970

banks on July 19, 1969 also created a space for ideological interaction between communism and this 'progressive' wing of the Congress.³⁵

iv) Centre-State Relationship

Though optimistic about the Indira Congress, the communists, however, did not stop upholding their old demand concerning the need for a restructuring of the Centre-state relationship. On the contrary, the recent experience of land reform and food problem further convinced them of the necessity of devolution of power from a unitary centre emasculating states' autonomy and curtailing the democratic rights of the nationalists. Alike on some other economic and administrative issues, in this sphere also the CPI(M) was more radical than its political counterparts or allies. In 1978, a few months after the empowerment of the Left Front on the floor of the Legislative Assembly the CPI(M) gave a proposal for a drastic alteration of the existing pattern of Centre-state relationship. The suggestions which it made were actually compilation of the various demands the party had raised in this sector in the preceding years.

³⁵ Since the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964 the Congress Party was facing internal schism and factional conflicts. The collective leadership or the Syndicate of men like K. Kamraj, Atulya Ghosh, S. K. Patil, N. Sanjeeva Reddy, S. Nijalingappa that took control of the party's organization often clashed with the party's representatives in the Parliament elected by popular verdicts. The situation became critical after the election of Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister in 1966. While the Syndicate accused Mrs. Gandhi of exercising extreme authoritarianism by disregarding the party's organizational rules, she raised a counter-allegation against the Syndicate of constraining the implementation of her progressive programme. Consequently the party split in 1969 with Indira Gandhi setting up a rival organization, which came to be known as the Congress (R) – (R for requisitionists). The Syndicate-dominated Congress came to be known as the Congress (O) – (O for organization). The progressive aspects of the Indira Congress were reflected in such measures like the nationalization of banks. (Chandra Bipan, Mukherjee Aditya, Mukherjee Mridula: *India After Independence*, New Delhi, 1999)

The demands were directed at dismantling the Centre's interference in the affairs of the state. Apart from some key sectors which were directly related to national security and development, others including agricultural, industrial, educational, social and welfare departments and enterprises with all the financial resources for them were claimed as privileges of the states. Along with the demand of 75% of the central revenues an increase in the Legislative powers of the states was visualized. For this purpose it was suggested that all subjects belonging to the Concurrent List should be transferred to the State List.³⁶ Not only the states should be given free hand to take steps for development but the power of the states for maintenance of law and order too should be enhanced. Hence Industrial Security Forces, Central Reserve Police and Border Security Forces should be handed over to the states and be under the effective control of the State Governments. Their recruitment, service conditions and disciplinary proceedings should all be under the jurisdiction of the states.

³⁶ The Constitution of India has adopted a principle of threefold distribution of legislative powers between the Union and the States (Article 246) List (I) or the Union List includes subjects like defence, foreign affairs, banking over which the Union has the exclusive power of legislation. List (II) or the State List comprises items like public order and police, local government, etc. List (III) gives concurrent powers to the Union and the State Legislatures over items like criminal law and procedure, civil procedure, economic and social planning. In case of overlapping of a matter as between the three lists predominance has been given to the Union Legislature. Similarly, in the Concurrent sphere in case of repugnancy between a Union and a State Law relating to the same subject, the former prevails. It is evident that the Constitution made the Union Legislature more powerful than the State Legislature. (Basu Durgadas' *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, New Delhi, 1982) This disparity of strength was always alleged by the Communist Party as a major cause of distress to the people of West Bengal.

The communists argued that in the absence of autonomy popular initiative in the states had been suppressed, while popular discontent against an oppressive Centre often had recourse to communalism or narrow provincialism. Thus the separatist movements in different states on issues like religion, language, ethnicity that threatened the democracy and integrity of the Indian State were interpreted as the consequence of the undemocratic policies of the Central Government. The decentralization, on the other hand, far from weakening the Centre, was expected to improve the political understanding between the Centre and the states and strengthen the democratic forces of the country. With this idea of an alternative federal structure the communists paved the way for building a united front on an all-India scale. In other words, an alternative political force to the Congress tended to be organized nationally.³⁷

The communists, however, did not fail to relate this struggle against the oppressive Centre with the struggle against class oppression. By making the equitable distribution of strength between the Centre and the state an electoral demand the communists tried to utilize the constitutional measures as instruments of class struggle and set the stage for executing a revolutionary programme. The governmental experiment was considered as a learning process for the masses who would experience the inadequacy of the administrative machinery to

³⁷ i) Kendra-Rajya Samparker Navamulyayan Chai (A Reassessment of The Centre-State Relation is Required) – A Statement issued on November 4, 1977

ii) Kendre Kata Kshamata Darkar (How Much Power Should Be Vested to The Centre) – A speech in the Legislative Assembly on March 25, 1978
Collected from *Jyoti Basu Nirbachita Rachana Sangraha* (Selected Works of Jyoti Basu) (Vol. III), Kolkata, 2003

fulfil their expectation and consequently would rely on self-initiative to reach the goal. P. Sundarayya and Promode Dasgupta, the two theoreticians and policy makers of the party at the national and state levels respectively, commented on this strategy of the party:

i) "Unless we engage people in a continuous struggle against the Centre, revolution will never materialize. West Bengal and Kerala are leading this struggle. ...Electoral success is not the end of the struggle but the beginning of the harder struggle in future."³⁸

ii) "For us election is a political struggle. Electoral victory is not an end in itself but our entry into a broader political struggle. Ministry is our weapon. This government is a stepping-stone to the people's democratic revolution. This government cannot solve the fundamental problems of our lives. But the limitation itself would be an eye-opener to the people. The significance of the electoral process lies not in solving the problem but in making people aware of the necessity of the revolution and enthusing them to search for an alternative through revolutionary process. The conflicting relation between the Centre and the state should be judged from this point of view."³⁹

The Collapse of the UF Government

Despite this potentiality, the UF Government was destined to die. The agglomeration of a number of parties who shared a common ground of opposition to the Congress but had no single vision of an alternative structure did not allow the unity of the United Front to be a solid one. The Congress took full advantage of the situation. It constantly invoked a dissident group to form

³⁸ Speech delivered by P. Sundarayya, the General Secretary of the CPI(M), *Ganashakti*, December 8, 1968)

³⁹ Speech delivered by Promode Dasgupta at Ramgarh Conference, *Ganashakti*, March 29, 1969

an alternative to Ajoy Mukherjee's leadership under P. C. Ghosh who along with the seventeen MLAs resigned in November 1967. They became a part of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal and formed a Progressive Democratic Front by allying with the Congress. They demanded that they would be allowed to form the Government with the support of the Congress.

The Congress Government at the Centre lost no time to take advantage of this situation. The Prime Minister set an unpalatable example of authoritarian intervention by the Central Government in state politics to take revenge against a politically opponent government. Governor Dharam Vira under the instruction of the Centre asked Ajoy Mukherjee to convene the Legislative Assembly to test the UF's majority in the House at a very short notice. As he failed to do so, his government was dissolved on November 21 under Article 164, Clause 1 of the Constitution⁴⁰ on the alleged ground of his lost majority in the House. The PDF Government was installed with P. C. Ghosh as the Chief Minister.

⁴⁰ Clause (1) and Clause (2) of Article 164 of the Constitution are as follows:

- i) The ministers shall hold office at the pleasure of the Governor;
- ii) The Council of Ministers shall be collectively responsible to the Legislative Assembly of the State.

These clauses imply that the Governor has the power to dismiss an individual minister at any time. He can also dismiss a Council of Ministers, only when the Legislative Assembly expresses its want of confidence in the Council of Ministers, either by a direct vote of no-confidence or censure or by defeating an important measure or the like, and the Governor does not think fit to dissolve the Assembly. The Governor cannot do so at his pleasure on his subjective estimate of the strength of the Chief Minister in the Assembly at any point of time because it is for the Legislative Assembly to enforce the collective responsibility of the Council of Ministers to itself. (Basu Durgadas: *Introduction to the Constitution of India*)

In protest the UF called a general strike. It was marred by police oppression unleashed by the PDF Government. But the popular sympathy seemed to be for the UF and a notion of conspiracy by the Congress Government at the Centre developed. On November 29 when the PDF Government called the Assembly Speaker Bijay Banerjee adjourned the House on the ground that the installation of this Government was constitutionally invalid. Violence broke out in the Assembly. P. C. Ghosh himself was wounded. Even more serious danger came from Ashu Ghosh, a former Congress State Minister, who played a key role in bringing the downfall of the UF Government through defections. He was frustrated by not getting a Cabinet post in the Congress-PDF Government and once again tried to bring it to an end. Ashu Ghosh's newly formed Indian National Democratic Front led by Shankar Das Banerjee along with 18 MLAs withdrew its support from the Government and demanded that they would be allowed to form a government. The United Front indicated that it might support the INDF Government. However, it stuck to its decision to keep the Assembly in adjournment. On February 14, the Governor convened the Assembly to pass the budget. But the UF Speaker once again adjourned the meeting sine die. So, the State Government was at an impasse. In this situation the Central Government brought the State Government to an end. On February 20, 1968 the President's Rule was imposed.

But neither the PDF Government nor the President's rule could establish a popular rule. The price hike of rice continued unabated. The total procurement up to January was a little over 75000 tonnes, i.e., 12.2% of the procurement target of 700000 tonnes. The response from the rice millers who were due to give the Government a levy to the extent of 70% was also

generally very poor. Industrial disputes proliferated. The State Government employees went on a total strike. All these seriously undermined the Congress reputation. On the contrary, the protest against the dismissal of the UF Government heightened. The UF Government too could not fulfil the popular expectations. Also it made a show of shameless factionalism. It broke due to the breakdown of understanding of its own members. But the way in which its life was cut short and the equally abortive nature of the following regimes strengthened popular sympathy for the UF. Besides, the Centre's interventionist nature was exposed to the people. The idea of an oppressive, unsympathetic Centre, ready to curb the autonomy of the state that had been a standard allegation of the leftist forces now became a fact. Thus, though constitutionally the UF Government was dislodged, politically the united front as an alternative to the Congress regime became more viable.⁴¹

The Second UF Government

Amidst this situation at the mid-term poll of 1969 the left forces were definitely in an advantageous position. The composition of the electoral alliances too was significantly different from that in 1967 Elections. The two Communist Parties and other left parties fought under the United Left Front instead of the divisive PULF and the ULF of the 1967 Elections. Thus a triangular contest was avoided. P. C. Ghosh returned to the Congress. In the elections the Congress which had expected

⁴¹ This section is based on *Hindustan Standard*, 1967-68 and 1970, Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)* & *Jyoti Basu Nirbachita Rachana Sangraha* (Vol. II)

single-handed victory got only 55 seats. The UF won 214 out of 280 seats. The CPI(M) won 80 out of the 100 seats it contested and emerged as the single largest party. The most notable feature of this election result was the marginalization of the third forces that secured only 7% in contrast to the 11% of votes cast in 1967. The vote bank was virtually polarized between the Congress and its left opposition.⁴² In other words, the left coalition consolidated itself as a viable alternative to the Congress.

The CPI(M) initially demanded the post of the Chief Minister but due to the opposition by the Bangla Congress the post went to Ajoy Mukherjee. Jyoti Basu retained his earlier post of the Deputy Chief Minister in charge of police, internal affairs and general administration. The other important ministries which went to the hand of the CPI(M) were Land and Land Revenue under Harekrishna Konar, Refugee Rehabilitation and Jail under Niranjan Sengupta, Education under Satyapriya Roy, Labour under Krishnapada Ghosh, Traffic under Abdullah Rasul, Fishery under Prabhas Roy, Excise under Krishnachandra Halder, Passport and Civil Defence under Gulam Yajdani. The other leftist partners in the UF who received portfolios were somnath Lahiri, Bishwanath Mukherjee, Renu Chakrabarty, Abdur Rezzak Khan from the CPI and Subodh Banerjee and Pratibha Mukherjee from the SUC.⁴³

The second UF too was doomed to die. As per electoral performance the UF emerged as a consolidated alternative to the Congress. But that viability could not be sustained because

⁴² *Election Results of West Bengal Statistics and Analysis* Communist Party of India (Marxist) West Bengal State Committee

⁴³ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

of the internal complexities of the coalition. The ideological dissension among the coalition partners frustrated the popular verdict to create a united front government against the Congress domination. The plurality of the components of the Front was marked by intense heterogeneity. Their ideologies were divergent, intentions were different, and their interests were contradictory. One of the contemporary analysts dissected the anatomy of the first UF that was virtually reproduced in the second one:

"None of the six members of the Cabinet is below 50. The team as a whole should inspire confidence about its integrity. Two of the Ministers are Communists. They are Jyoti Basu and Somnath Lahiri. Basu belongs to the Marxist group.

...The other four have Congress blood running through their veins. Mukherjee, Ghosh, Hemanta Basu and the youngest of them, Jehangir Kabir, have spent the best part of their political life in the Congress. Ghosh left it the early fifties. After a spell in the Krishak Majdoor Praja Party, he retired from political life and devoted himself to constructive activity. This election marks his return to politics. Hemanta Basu has for many years been the leader of the Forward Bloc. Mukherjee, known as the Tamluk Gandhi for his austere habits, and Kabir left the Congress last year and set up the Bangla Congress."⁴⁴

This political diversity of the partners entailed a whole range of complexities in the policies of the United Front, as he elaborated:

"Their programmes have many things in common. This has enabled them to draw up a common minimum programme. Yet, the differences that keep them apart as parties are sharp and in some cases fundamental.

...These former Congress leaders, one can perhaps be sure, would keep the Ministry on an even keel in the event of the Communists trying to push it to the extreme Left."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Roy Ranajit: *The Agony of West Bengal*, Kolkata, 1973, pp. 106-107

⁴⁵ Ibid. pp. 105-107

In other words, the flow of 'Congress blood' in the veins of the members of the Bangla Congress made them, despite their political dissension with the Congress, class brethren of the Congress leaders. In terms of their social base as well as social aspirations the Bangla Congressmen had no fundamental difference from their former political colleagues. On the contrary, this class identity naturally distanced them from their communist partners. True, the Communist Party too was a divided house. Not only the CPI(M) differed from the CPI in specifying the issues and modalities of class struggle but they had also a strong sense of rivalry against each other. Their difference from the Bangla Congress, however, had to be rooted in their class positions. The features of class enemy that particularly the CPI(M) had found in the Congress could be traced in the Bangla Congress too. This made the communist alliance with the Bangla Congress both questionable and inconsistent, as a sharp voice of criticism was heard from a political observer:

"Neither the alliance nor the dissension of the partners of the United Front have any ideological basis. Hence these coalitions are extremely fragile and continually shifting. We are experiencing it since 1967. None of the parties who are parts of this Front is an exception. Promode Dasgupta of the CPI(M) has a standard allegation against the leaders of the CPI, 'They cannot rely on their communist partner Jyoti Basu and like to entrust the responsibility of the Home Department upon a non-communist leader.' But even this CPI(M) in order to marginalizing its communist counterpart does not hesitate ...to make 'sweet alliance' with a 'party of landlords', a term, which is generated from the CPI(M)'s class theory. How would you explain this ideologically?"⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Sengupta Barun: *Rajnitter Rangamanche* (On The Stage of Politics), Kolkata, 1974, pp. 75-76

The messianic image of the CPI for the poor and the landless people could not be matched with its alliance with a 'pro-landlord party' except on the ground of mere political calculation. No wonder that such political friendship was vulnerable to all sorts of ideological questions and liable to crack in the long run.

The militant land policy of the CPI(M) that had been the main cause of the breach between the Bangla Congress and the communists during the first UF Government again came as a major cause of dissension. The Communist Party after its empowerment for the second time vigorously pursued its land policy, and during the Second UF Government nearly 8 lakhs *bigha* (a unit of land measurement) of cultivable land which had been possessed illegally by the jotedars and other landlords were taken away by the landless and small peasants.⁴⁷ The Bangla Congress did not approve of any aggressive attack on the big landholders who constituted the main chunk in its vote bank. For the CPI(M), on the other hand, it was imperative to continue the peasant mobilization. This was all the more necessary in the context of the growing penetration of the radical Maoist outfits in the rural areas. To ensure legitimacy in communist politics and popularity in electoral field the CPI(M) had to pursue a militant land programme. On the contrary, this policy alienated it from its electoral partner.

In industrial field also the earlier experience was repeated. The CPI(M) along with few of its left allies were alleged to have induced militancy among workers that the pro-capitalist

⁴⁷ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

Bangla Congress refused to indulge in. This increased tension affected both economic and political life of the state. Labour Minister K. P. Ghosh from the CPI(M) himself admitted that the industrial climate in the state was not at all a healthy one. Over 48000 workers had been rendered jobless, following the managements' motivated closure of 161 industries. Industrial expansion had virtually stopped. About 2000000 people remained unemployed.⁴⁸ The situation worsened as some businessmen sought the West Bengal Government's permission to shift their industries to other states like Maharastra, Delhi, Haryana. The political instability of West Bengal and the allurements given by some other State Governments that prompted those industrialists to withdraw themselves from the state openly threatened the economic base of the UF Government.⁴⁹ This seriously aggravated the already critical problem of unemployment and considerably affected the revenue earnings of the Government. No wonder that the militancy of the labouring masses induced by the communists increased considerably. Jyoti Basu explained the situation:

"This time millions of labourers in mills and factories made organized protests against the injustice and exploitation of the owners. In none of such occasions the UF Government sent its police force to disperse the protesting labourers. The workers, on the other hand, through organized effort made many significant achievements regarding their rights on such issues like retrenchment, wage, bonus, etc. What had been spontaneous outburst during the first UF Government was transformed into organized movement during the second regime of the UF. Two and a half lakhs jutemill

⁴⁸ *Hindustan Standard*, January 18, 1970

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* January 17, 1970

workers of the state through a historic strike achieved an increase of wage by Rs. 30 per month. Two lakhs of labourers of tea plantation, fifty thousand workers of weaving mills, workers of engineering industry and many other small and big industries realized many of their demands through the connivance of the government.”

But Basu also noted the non-cooperating and even conspiratorial attitude of the Bangla Congress:

“We were put to great trouble in running the Second UF Government. The Bangla Congress was never tired of humiliating us. The ideological conflict between the Bangla Congress and the CPI(M) that created sensation in the politics of the state had its impact on the Cabinet too.

...Sushil Dhara who was a close associate of Ajoy Mukherjee in the Bangla Congress and one of our Cabinet colleagues launched a propaganda campaign almost in the style of Goebbels to disgrace the Home Ministry. They were supported by some of our coalition partners. The intention of such campaigns was clear. Our coalition partners wanted a change in the existing police system in the state. The principle, which the United Front had adopted and sincerely practiced, that the police force should not be used against the peasant, labour or any other mass movement perturbed them. The allegation of putting the police force into inaction was another dangerous proposition. During the Congress regime the initiative of the police force primarily meant the suppression of the popular movements for livelihood and protect the cause of the landlords and factory owners. The United Front after empowerment was determined to halt this so-called ‘active police force’. The Congress and the elements of vested interests naturally reacted to this step with the accusation of constraining to the action of the police force. Surprisingly the Bangla Congress too took up this cause. But so far the CPI(M) would enjoy power in the Cabinet and keep charge of the Home Department, no change in the situation would be possible. Hence they were so aggressive to the CPI(M).”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 146-149

Thus the ideological gap between the Bangla Congress and the CPI(M) tended to break their political understanding. Slandorous campaigns were made against each other by both parties. The CPI(M) which enjoyed the ministry of police force was constantly being accused to have organized violence against the coalition partners for keeping up unrivalled control in different popular fronts. Ajoy Mukherjee led a 72-hour fast since December 1 against this growing violence. The Bangla Congress even alleged that a conspiracy to form a new government with Jyoti Basu as the Chief Minister was being hatched by the CPI(M), the RSP and also a section of the Bangla Congress. The leftist camp itself too, however, was a divided house. The undercurrent of collision between the CPI and the CPI(M) that sometimes came to surface ever since the formation of the two parties continued unabated. In Kerala the fall of the Namboodiripad Ministry in November 1969 was alleged to have been caused by the CPI.⁵¹

In West Bengal too the CPI endeavoured to prevent the fall of the UF and was unwilling to join in a new government that could include the Congress. But it supported the Bangla Congress's attempt to reduce the power of the CPI(M). Similarly

⁵¹ The anti-Congress United Front which came to power in the Legislative Assembly of Kerala in 1967 with the two communist parties at its core suffered from severe inter-party conflicts. Not only there was a lack of understanding between the communists and the non-communist partners of the UF like the SSP and the Muslim League, but the two communist houses were also sharply antagonistic to each other. While the CPI(M) alleged its coalition partners of constraining to the implementation of the UF programme, the CPI demanded the enquiry against the corrupt CPI(M) ministers. In the face of the growing opposition from its own Government, Chief Minister Namboodiripad resigned in October 1969. (Nossiter T. J.: *Communism in Kerala*)

the members of the new-born SUC (Socialist Unity Centre), a left group with a radical approach, posed a challenge to the CPI(M) kind of politics and the challenge was on most occasions met with the exercise of physical violence. So, it was difficult for the CPI(M) too to coalesce the opposition forces to form an alternative left group. The situation reached its climax when Ajoy Mukherjee resigned on March 16, 1970. Jyoti Basu formally claimed the majority. But the Centre resumed its interventionist role to prohibit the formation of a left ministry in the state. Dhavan who replaced Dharam Vira as the Governor demanded the immediate submission of the full list of supporters to the CPI(M). Failing to do so Basu's claim was rejected. The President's Rule was imposed and another election was imminent. Chaos prevailed. The partners of coalition, falling apart, became engaged in campaigns and attacks against each other. The experiment in left coalition met with another abject failure.⁵²

The UF Regimes: Lessons and Impact

The two regimes of the United Front, short and trouble-torn though they were, left a significant impression on popular minds about communist politics. For the makers of the communist movement in West Bengal too, this phase left a lesson. True, the communists at this period did not have the strength to form a government of their own. But they were the most important force in the coalition. This importance could be judged not by their numerical majority alone. It was the

⁵² *Hindustan Standard* 1970 & Jyoti Basu's *Nirbachita Rachana Sangraha* (Vol. II)

communist involvement that gave the UF régime a colour and character fundamentally different from the Congress Government which the people of the state had so far been familiar with.

The two UF governments, despite several failures, set a new style in politics and governance. The kind of issues they raised and the way they tried to solve the problems injected a radical spirit to the functioning of parliamentary democracy. True, the United Front itself was not a homogenous force. One of its major components was the Bangla Congress whose class character by no means matched the tune of the leftist political bloc. It was this ideological difference that ultimately broke down the alliance. Yet, the leftist bloc with the communists at its head could establish its distinctiveness and could flare up popular imagination by the vision of an alternative government.

The communists were also a divided force. The CPI(M) made a greater showdown of militancy which its political counterpart did not welcome. On the other hand, the CPI(M) did not share the optimism of the CPI about the progressive wing of the Congress Government. True, the CPI too subscribed to a radical ideology and adopted such militant programme as 'operation land grabbing' in 1970. In the process it led the people to occupy about 2100000 acres of land all over the country from the Government, big landlords and monopolists.⁵³ However, its faith in the socialist promises as well as the progressive nature of the Congress regime since the Nehruvian era prevented it from undertaking any strong anti-Congress action. Hence its

⁵³ *Hindustan Standard*, May 1970

militancy could not match with that of the CPI(M). In respect of acceptability to the people too, the CPI(M) far surpassed the CPI and became the leader of the left bloc in the true sense of the term.

Despite these dissensions and disagreement, the people of West Bengal did not misread the potentiality of this alternative political force. This popular confidence and expectation again had a sustaining effect on the electoral performance of the UF in general and the CPI(M) in particular. A political observer of the time pointed to this decisive break which the UF could make in the Congress led politics of the state:

“It is true that the UF Government could fulfil little of the expectation of the people of West Bengal.

...But it is also true that this failure as well as the lack of unity among the partners of the UF have not created much bitterness among the general masses. They lament on the negative aspects of the UF Government but this lamentation has not yet induced any agitation or even opposition by them. Those who magnify this popular frustration to create an anti-UF stance in near future must not forget that, despite many failures and sufferings that were inflicted upon the people during the Congress regimes, the people of West Bengal hailed the Congress Party in power in three successive elections.

...A large section of the common masses still firmly believe that the UF Government would be better than the Congress for our state.”⁵⁴

If the people learnt about the communists through the UF regimes the communist leaders also derived some lessons from the UF experiments. The positive sides of the coalition politics and the electoral methods were clear. The communists made

⁵⁴ Sengupta Barun: *Rajnuteer Rangamanche*, pp. 26-27

alliances with some political forces which were not their ideological brethren but were acceptable to the people. It is through this tactical alliance that the communists did have access to a wider popular audience than what could be captured by the ideology and programme of their own. Also this coalition politics made the empowerment of the communist forces possible. This, on the other hand, gave the Communist Parties the opportunity to utilize the constitutional instruments to implement their reformist programme. In other words, by shedding ideological conservatism political success was gained. Jyoti Basu who led the CPI(M) and also held important positions in the UF governments admitted the utility of coalition politics for the growth of the Communist Party as a popular force:

“An important aspect of the UF principle was to unite the different layers of population on some issues of common interest. Nearly in each year of the 1950s we organized mass movements on any of such issues.

All of these movements were led by some sort of coalition. Had our party led those movements in single hand these could not have been so widespread. Indeed, in the early '50s people had many wrong ideas about us. Some of them suspected us as spies of foreign powers, some of them despised as rogues and ruffians, and to another category of population we were like a strange sect. Most of the people did not even comprehend the fact that the communists were the part of the common masses, neither different nor dangerous. In those places, however, where we worked for a long period among the peasants, labourers and the middle class people the common masses by their day-to-day experiences became acquainted with us. Some of them did not support us politically or ideologically, yet, appreciated our honesty, devotion and idealism. It was for this reason that within a few months' preparation after our release from jail we won 28 seats in the Election of 1952. However, by that time our popular base was not very strong. But the leadership of the United Front could give our

movements greater public exposure and could attract many people who had so far showed no interest about us. Now once they came into contact with us and became personally acquainted with our cadres, their wrong perception and confusion about us were gradually cleared.”⁵⁵

At the theoretical level the party justified the coalition strategy as a stepping-stone to launch a revolutionary programme. Anil Biswas who later became the Secretary of the West Bengal State Committee of the CPI(M) explained this calculation of the party in entering coalition politics:

“When, after the formation of the first UF Government the contradictory class interests of the big landlords and the other sections of population created a tension in rural Bengal the Bangla Congress immediately sided with the former. This was, however, not at all unexpected. The CPI(M) had a premonition about all of those negative factors. Nevertheless, the party decided to join the UF Government. When during the UF regime class conflicts reached at a high pitch in rural Bengal Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad commented: “The representatives of the big landlords (the Bangla Congress) may dislike and even oppose to the programme of land reform. But why should the common masses of rural Bengal who have so far followed them (big landlords), subscribe to this oppositional move? Rather they would lend their support to the Front’s programme. In consequence, the representatives of the landlords would be alienated from a large bulk of its own followers. Thus they would face the greatest loss.”⁵⁶

In other words, by allying with the constitutional political forces the communists planned to unmask their exploitative class character and to prove that the existing administrative machinery

⁵⁵ Basu Jyoti: Party, Yuktafront O Sadharan Manus (The Party, The United Front and The Common People), *Deshhitaishi*, 1981, *Sharad Sankhya*, Kolkata, Collected from *Jyoti Basu Nirbachita Rachanasangraha*, Vol.-3, pp. 152-153

⁵⁶ Biswas Anil: *Nikhnut Kajer Manus Kakababu* (Uncle-An Ideal Man of Work) Collected from *Ganashakti*, Volume at the commemoration of the Birth Centenary of Muzaffar Ahmad, 1989, p. 174

was incapable of ending an oppressive system. In this way, they would let the people to be disillusioned with the existing political order and to come forward to participate in a revolutionary programme.

Yet, notwithstanding these theoretical statements, the United Front Government appeared to be the only viable way for the communists to combat the right-wing politics in the state. The inadequacy of radical militancy could be complemented by a prudent partnership with the like-minded political parties. The communists could have taken a more cautious position in selecting the partners and in formulating the programme in future to reduce the fragility of a coalition government. This kind of political combination, instead of sheer militancy in action, set a sustainable pattern of communist politics in the state in future. This was the third and perhaps the most important benefit as well as lesson which the communists derived from the experiment in coalition politics.

The negative aspects of the UF experiments, however, were no less apparent. The continuous schism among the coalition partners, the arbitrary and authoritarian intervention of the Central Government in the affairs of the state that created deadlock and caused the premature demise of the government severely constrained the implementation of communist policies. This experience once again raised question about the utility of parliamentary politics even as a preparatory phase for achieving the socialist goal. Consequently there came another bitter episode of ideological controversies and rival actions within the communist houses. It was precisely during those years when the two Communist Parties banked upon electoral politics and

rejoiced at empowerment that the most serious challenge to electoral experiment was setting in. It was made by a group of defectors who came mostly from the CPI(M) which had earlier broke away from the undivided Communist Party with the promise to rectify the 'revisionism of the old guards'. This new group pointed out the inconsistencies of the electoral method to the communist doctrine and launched the most vigorous experiment in radicalism in the history of the entire leftist movement in the state. Naturally it stood as a touchstone to judge the ideological purity of those communist groups engaged in parliamentary politics. The result was that throughout the period of constitutional experiment the Communist Parties had to keep up a parallel struggle to sustain their revolutionary identity in a rhetorical framework.

Chapter-VI

Communists with Arms-High Tide of Radicalism (1964-1971)

A 'Left' Challenge to 'Leftism'

In 1967, exactly in the year the two mainstream Communist Parties first became the part of the ruling coalition in West Bengal, another kind of communist challenge rejected the principles of electoral politics. It started with an incident of agrarian outburst led by a group of communists in an area of North Bengal called Naxalbari. They were mainly a breakaway group from the CPI(M) which left the older party organization on the allegation of its growing indulgence in revisionism. Exposing the Maoist ideal of an agrarian armed revolution they rejected all kinds of constitutional practices and preferred to be an underground party from the beginning. Its principal method of action was annihilation of class enemies by sudden attacks organized in the style of guerrilla warfare. The CPI(M-L), as this radical outfit came to be known after the formal rupture, posed a serious challenge to the ideological foundation which the mainstream Communist Parties had created since the early 1950s by balancing an electoral strategy for immediate relief with a long-term revolutionary programme for complete emancipation. It refused to subscribe to the idea of formation of any intermediary stage of limited achievement between exploitation and liberation.

Spark of Radicalism: Naxalbari Upsurge

The first expression of this kind of agrarian revolution was the incident of Naxalbari in North Bengal. The hilly terrain of this region, inhabited mostly by the tribal people, was exposed

to a double-edged weapon of agrarian exploitation. Large part of the land in this area was devoted to tea plantation. Hence there developed all the exploitative features of plantation economy such as the semi-slave status of the daily wage labourers, the investment of huge amount of capital from both foreign and indigenous agencies and its use in extremely profiteering manner, the absorption of substantial amount of land in a single farm. In the non-plantation zone of cultivable land also agrarian life was full of maladies. Concentration of land was a major source of tension in agrarian relations. The land reform legislations of 1950s which tried to break this concentration met with little success. Tea estates were left outside their corpus. Tea cultivation was not feasible in an area of 25 acres or less, the amount at which the ceiling of landholding was fixed. Hence these legislations were not applied to the tea garden. Even in non-plantation areas where ceiling was imposed, rampant evasion of the rule by *benami* holdings frustrated the purpose of ceiling. Eviction of small peasants from land, malpractice in the share of agricultural products were some other major issues of dissension.¹

The peasant agitation in Naxalbari that started since March 1967 under the leadership of the radical group of the CPI(M) was directed against these wrongs of the land system. Within a few months some police stations of the region like Naxalbari, Kharibari, Phansidewa felt the impact of militant activities like forcible occupation of land, looting of paddy, ploughing land and money from the big landowners and hoarders, demonstration with bows and arrows. The spirit of militancy was also felt in

¹ Banerjee Sumanta: *In the Wake of Naxalbari*, Kolkata, 1980, *The Statesman & Hindustan Standard*, May-August 1967

the tea gardens and the adjacent areas in Ghaybari, Sourini, Tungling. The militants were fully exploiting the topographical and political distinctiveness of these territories. The proximity with the borders of Nepal and East Pakistan (at present Bangladesh), the inaccessibility of the hilly bushy terrains provided a favourable environment to the militants to find easy hide-outs and to use the channels of popular connections overlapping the borders for expanding their activities. The movement took a serious turn as the violent clashes between the people and the police took a toll in the death of a number of persons including women and children on the side of the agitationists and a Police Inspector on the other side.²

The contemporary reports from nearly all quarters had agreement about the injustice of the land system as the main cause of these popular disturbances. *The Statesman* which was neither politically nor ideologically supporting such militant outbursts, however, could not deny the justification of the material grievances of the people:

"In an analysis of the recent trouble at Naxalbari, several causes, some confused and others clear, are discernible.

These relate to factors concerning land use, unsatisfactory land settlements, the belligerence of certain tribals under the leadership of the extreme wing of the CPI Marxists and the possibility of defying law and order with impunity owing to the easy accessibility to Nepal and East Pakistan borders.

...The Phansidewa area of Siliguri subdivision comprising Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa has been the scene of age-old agrarian disputes in which forces of jotedars had been pitted against the land-hungry kisans and sharecroppers."³

² Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha* (About Charu Mazumdar), Kolkata, 1989, *The Statesman & Hindustan Standard*, May-August 1967

³ *The Statesman*, May 29, 1967

Another newspaper, *Hindustan Standard*, also referred to a number of official reports submitted by persons like Harekrishna Konar and Bishwanath Mukherjee, who, despite opposing the 'illegal' activities of the peasants, could not ignore the legitimacy of their demands:

"The Minister for Land and Land Revenue, Mr. Hare Krishna Konar who had come back from the Naxalbari tour recently in its report dated May 18 to the Chief Minister said that the matter could not be tackled simply as a law and order problem, because the *Adivasis* (original inhabitants) had genuine grievances about forcible evictions from the lands cultivated by them. The entire question should be handled carefully. Otherwise the situation might worsen.

...Mr. Bishwanath Mukherjee, Irrigation Minister and CPI leader also agreed with Mr. Konar that the matter should not be treated as merely a law and order problem. The Minister for Land and Land Revenue, Mr. Mukherjee said, might set up camps in the Naxalbari area for 7 days and settle all land disputes there personally."⁴

These communist ministers also undertook some remedial measures to rectify the wrongs of the land system. The UF Government made a vigorous campaign for the recovery of the illegal holdings and the redistribution of that land among the landless and also for forcible procurement of food grains from the hoarders. But the novelty of the Naxalite movement was that it rejected all sorts of constitutional actions as pitfalls of revisionism and wanted to effect a wholesome change through armed struggle. Indeed, the communist inducement to the peasants to demand the fair distribution of land in Naxalbari region can be traced since the 1950s.⁵

⁴ *Hindustan Standard*, May 27, 1967

⁵ Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdar's Katha*

But in 1967, the militancy acquired a new momentum and the movement took a different turn from the line followed by the mainstream Communist Parties. While organizing an agrarian insurrection with the ultimate objective of an armed revolution, these extremists vehemently denounced their communist counterparts in an elected government as 'revisionists and class collaborationists'. The limitations of constitutional reforms to bring about fundamental change in society and economy, however, were not unknown to the communists engaged in electoral politics. The idea that nothing less than a revolutionary change in power structure should precede the foundation of a socialist system was also appreciated by them. Hence armed revolution with a socialist objective was set as the final stage of action by both of the Communist Parties striving for electoral power. But at the same time they did not ignore the limited possibility of electoral institutions to bring some immediate and temporary relief to the people. This transitional phase was also expected to bolster up the political consciousness of the people and make them prepared for future revolution.

But the peasants in Naxalbari adopted a fundamentally different method of action. The peasant masses in this area, as the *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China described it, "have thrown off the shackles of modern revisionism and smashed the trammels that bound them. They have seized grain, land and weapons from the landlords and plantation owners, punished the local tyrants and wicked gentry, and ambushed the reactionary troops and police that went to suppress them thus demonstrating the enormous might of the peasants' revolutionary armed struggle." By hailing this energetic attempt as a 'Spring Thunder over India' the *People's Daily*

also chalked out a guideline for the rightful course of Indian revolution:

"Appeal of spring thunder has crashed over the land of India. Revolutionary peasants in the Darjeeling area have risen in rebellion. Under the leadership of a revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party, a red area of rural revolutionary armed struggle has been established in India. This is a development of tremendous significance for the Indian people's revolutionary struggle.

...Armed struggle is the only correct road for the Indian revolution; there is no other road whatsoever. Such trash as "Gandhi-ism", "parliamentary road" and the like are opium used by the Indian ruling classes to paralyse the Indian people. Only by relying on violent revolution and taking the road of armed struggle can India be saved and the Indian people achieve complete liberation.

...The Indian revolution must take the road of relying on the peasants, establishing base areas in the countryside, persisting in protracted armed struggle and using the road, the road that has led the Chinese revolution to victory, and the only road to victory for the revolutions of all oppressed nations and peoples."⁶

'Left' within the 'Left': Ideological Genesis

Though the Naxalbari area was the field to experience the first impact of the resurgent radical leftism in West Bengal, the ideological deliberations on this political strand started long ago at the party's intellectual circles in Calcutta. Actually the split of the party in 1964 failed to resolve the ideological

⁶ Spring Thunder Over India

This was first published as an editorial in *People's Daily*, organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on July 5, 1967. It was reproduced in *Liberation*, Vol.-1, No-1, November 1967

This section is written on the basis of the information collected from the reports of the newspapers – *Hindustan Standard* and *The Statesman* published in 1967, and the memoir Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*

differences among its members. The radical circles that centred around study groups kept alive a strong voice of dissent against the electoral and reformist approach of the mainstream communists. Most of them were factions within the CPI(M) which promised to restore militancy to the communist tradition in the country but was alleged to have failed to do so. These frictions resulted in an open split after the formation of the electoral alliance of the CPI(M) with the CPI of which it was a breakaway group and the Bangla Congress which was supposed to be an ideological enemy. This appeared to be a betrayal to the cause of radicalism. The Naxalbari Upsurge was an immediate response to it. Arun Prosad Mukherjee who was one of those police officers to handle the Naxalite movement from its beginning found in the Naxalbari outburst immediately after the installation of the UF Government a calculated attempt by the non-conformists to demoralize the communists engaged in electoral practice.⁷ But even before the formal launching of a movement the adverse reaction of the radicals to the 'revisionism' of the CPI(M) leaders who had left the old guards of the party on the same ground was not concealed.

A number of developments, both within and outside the country, fed the radical groups. The radical assertion of the international communist movement in places like Vietnam or Latin America combined with the militant overtone of the masses in recurrent food movements and demands for the release of the prisoners convinced them of the proximity of a revolution. Meanwhile, a rupture within the world communist movement

⁷ Interview with Arun Prosad Mukherjee, January 2005

made the Indian communists further vulnerable to inner-party dissension. The Mao-Lieu feud which originated from Mao's radical policy vis-à-vis Shao Chi's plan had a direct impact on the left-communist party of India. The CPI(M) party leaders were unofficially divided into two groups – a) Peking group b) Shanghai group. The extremist section led by B. T. Ranadive, Harekrishna Konar, Promode Dasgupta was ideologically closer to the pro-Mao Peking group. Other prominent left communists like A. K. Gopalan, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Jyoti Basu, on the other hand, favoured the line of the Shanghai group which sympathized with President Liu Shao Chi and his anti-Mao followers.⁸

This rift in the leadership encouraged the fissiparous elements that legitimized their challenge to the neo-revisionist leaders in the name of restoring the ideological purity of the party. There sprouted a number of groups like *Revolutionary Council* led by Parimal Dasgupta, Shaibal Datta, Azizul Houque; *Marx-Engels Institute* in charge of Sushital Raychaudhuri; *Chinta* by Amulya Sen and Sudhir Bhattacharya. These groups had no unanimity of opinion and not all of them agreed upon making a separate party. But they shared a common tone of militancy and criticism against the existing left leadership and carried on debates and dissensions.⁹ The CPI(ML) which also emerged through the violent outburst in 1967 as a bloc and only

⁸ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, February 15, 1967

⁹ Acharya Anil: *Sath Sattarer Chatra Andolan* (Student Movements of The Sixties and The Seventies), Kolkata, 1988

later declared itself to be a party¹⁰ mobilized some of these groups and set them on the path of revolutionary action. Azizul Houque who was a part of this mobilization traced the origin of this extremist line:

“An ‘unenthusiastic and conspiratorial’ line of action which was contradictory with the communist tradition became the dominant party culture.

...No wonder that the radicals would search for an alternative under such conditions. Immediately after the party Congress* they began to outline the programmes of militant movements and submit them to the party centres. They expected that the leaders would send them to the different units of the party for consideration and necessary revisions. It was by no means an unfair expectation but was in conformity with the party’s principle. Previously, while working along with the Dangeites, these leaders had made the same demand to the Politburo....

But when the leaders in complete disregard of democratic centralism suppressed those papers the radicals themselves took the initiative to propagate them among different popular organizations.

So, it seems that these cadres originally had complete loyalty to the party discipline and when the leaders tried to throttle their voice, their discontent turned into disobedience. Such rebellious activities, though uncoordinated, began to spread all over the country.

Among those rebellious groups the peasant association of Siliguri sub-division at Darjeeling District in West Bengal under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar set out with a long-term objective that fitted into the socio-economic perspective of the country and the party’s position in it.”¹¹

¹⁰ The CPI(ML) as a party was born in April 1969. Though the radical outfits of the CPI(M) were continually publishing their pamphlets since the mid-1960s to show the difference of their positions from the mainstream party line and launched a series of violent actions since 1967, the formal declaration of a separate party awaited till April 1969. (Houque Ajijul: *Naxalbari: Tirish Bachhar Age Ebn Pare*, Kolkata, 1991 & Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*)

¹¹ Houque Ajijul: *Naxalbari: Tirish Bachhar Age Ebn Pare* (Naxalbari: Thirty Years Before and After), pp. 161-162 * The party congress mentioned here implied the 7th Congress of the defected group from the CPI at Calcutta in 1964.

An article published in *Deshabrati*, the journal which was the mouthpiece of radical communism voiced the response of the dissident groups to the 'neo-revisionism' of the CPI(M). Saroj Dutta, an eminent exponent of the Naxalite ideology, in this article referred to a reflection of Jatin Chakraborty on Jyoti Basu, published in a contemporary film magazine *Prasad*. Dutta wrote:

"My attention was drawn to this article by an unknown reader of *Deshabrati*. The article has been discovered at a critical period when Ajay Mukherjee's opposition to Jyoti Basu is being interpreted as an attack on revolutionaries by counter-revolutionary forces and the dissension among partners is being projected as class struggle.

...Jatinbabu commented that Dr. Roy appreciated Jyoti Basu's potentiality as a great leader. In his private life he was very much affectionate to Jyoti Basu. He opposed Jyoti Basu as a communist but was fond of him as a man.

Once Jyoti Basu fell ill. Dr. Roy told him, "Jyoti, if you want to debunk me you need to maintain good health. Please come to my chamber tomorrow." Jyoti Basu accepted the invitation and Dr. Roy after proper medical check-up gave him some advice.

...Jatin Babu's comment brings out the essence of politics that Jyoti Basu and the CPI(M) represent. It reveals that in the changed context Jyoti Basu is the new edition of Bidhan Roy and the CPI(M) is the new version of the Congress. The quarreling partners of the UF presents essentially the same picture of factional strife within the Congress in 'Indicate'-'Syndicate' and many other possible 'cates'." ¹²

The identification of Jyoti Basu as a political leader with B. C. Roy and Ajoy Mukherjee, who were supposed to be his ideological opponents, by a person who advocated unbridled

¹² Saroj Dutta *Rachanasangraha (Tritiya Khanda)* (Collected Works of Saroj Dutta, Vol. 3), *Shadid Saroj Dutta Smritiraksha Committee*, Kolkata, 1999, pp. 169-171
Jatin Chakraborty was the leader of the RSP, which was a partner of the UF.

enmity against all sorts of bourgeois trends was highly suggestive. It showed the kind of challenge the Naxalites posed to the mainstream Communist Parties.

Arun Prosad Mukherjee commented on this ideological dissension of the Communist Party as the genesis of the Naxalites:

“Between 1964 and mid-1965, the government came across some documents which advocated capture of power through armed struggle and these were being circulated secretly. The government presumed that these were written by the CPI/CPM as an alternative strategy in addition to their avowed policy of capturing power through electoral process. Later in 1967, with the formation of the 14-party United Front Government and starting of the left extremist movement by the followers of Charu Mazumdar in March of that year, it came to light that those were not the party lines of the CPM but of its dissident group led by Charu Mazumdar. We also came to know subsequently that these documents were the handiwork of Shri Mazumdar, though these were being circulated under the name of CPM, and that the CPM did not support the lines propagated by Charubabu.”¹³

Whirlwind of Radicalism

i) In Student Politics

So, the birth of the CPI(ML) marked the logical culmination of the growing radicalization of the party since the period preceding its first split. The process of consolidation of the radical forces, however, did not end here. On the other hand, though the CPI(ML) as the mainstream extremist group dominated the others, the integration was never complete. The groups came together on a common point of militancy but had

¹³ Interview with Arun Prosad Mukherjee, January 2005

marked differences on many other issues. The result was that the CPI(ML) ever since its birth was vulnerable to inner-party dissension that caused its discomfiture within a few years.

However, the educational institutions, particularly the colleges and universities that later became the target of attack by the Naxalites as the agency of colonial education became the breeding ground of the Naxalite politics. Since in urban areas the Naxalite politics had an attraction for young men, the students formed their core. This kind of student radicalism developed independently of the rural militancy in Naxalbari. Later these two streams merged and gave birth to a powerful wave of extremism. Student politics brought up its radical face in college unions and then tied itself to popular politics. Presidency College which was the eye of storm set a classic example of the radicalization of the urban youth in the late 1960s. Rajat Kanta Ray, a famous historian of later years and presently the Vice-chancellor of Vishwabharati University, had been a student of Presidency College in the middle of the 1960s and noted this turn in student politics in his reminiscences:

“At Kabli’s request I agreed to join the P.C.S.O. and fight in the election of the student union. I came to know that P.C.S.O. was not directly connected either with the Congress or with any other political party, though it had an anti-communist posture. On the other side, S.F. was the student wing of the Communist Party. This information was enough for me to give my consent. However, I was not feeling comfortable at the company of the P.C.S.O. members. In our batch the P.C.S.O. formed its social base with the westernized students. A few students educated in Bengali medium schools also joined it. But the majority of its members were students from English medium schools and conversant with western etiquette. They set the standard of this student union. But as this category of students was branded as the elite, this characterization also affected the P.C.S.O. as a group. The students’ opinion about it gradually began to change. In next year’s union election

(1964-65) when we were second year's students, the P.C.S.O. and the S.F. gained equal number of seats. Neither P.C.S.O. nor S.F. could form the Union.

The next year's election was a turning point of student politics in the college. The P.C.S.O. lost and the S.F. won. The union was captured by Kaka's (Asim Chatterjee) group. If this did not happen, none of the following incidents like the unrest in the Hindu Hostel, seizure of the college, and outburst of the Naxalite movement could take place. So, the election results of the students' union in that year had a special significance.

Thus a meaningful change took place in the three successive years. At the first year the victory of the P.C.S.O. in the union's election, the equal number of seats for P.C.S.O. and the S.F. in the second year, and the S.F.'s victory at the third year brought the college politics along with the political situation of the state into a whirlwind. At this moment, another incident implied the radical turn in college politics. Oneday, in protest of the US bombing at Hanoi and Haiphong Kaka's group made a seizure at the college gate and closed the college. This was the first political strike I experienced in the college. It foreshadowed the future developments.

...By that time, the student community began to feel a sense of indignation against the police and administration. When I was first admitted into the college the situation was different. The attitude to treat the police as the people's enemy began to grow in the college campus in 1966. In that year we had been the students of outgoing third year. In such a situation the hunger strike at the hostel signaled the disaster in the college. Oneday when I arrived at the college the news of the hunger strike burst in. The residential students of the Hindu Hostel had many allegations which they placed before the hostel Superintendent Prof. Haraprasad Mitra and made a hunger strike. No doubt, their demands were justified. Otherwise, a baseless agitation could not be sustained. But it is also undeniable that Kaka and his group used those student issues to achieve their political objective.

...However, the crisis was intensifying. ... The situation worsened when the college gate was seized by the agitators. ... The seizure continued for a long period. The P.C.S.O. members had hardly any idea of street politics or hooliganism. Nor were they backed by any political party. Naturally, the resistance they could uphold was not at all sufficient.

...The genuine protest came from the newly admitted students in the first year. Oneday we all wondered to know that a first year girl named Lali Gupta jumped over the railings and entered the college. She was immediately followed by the others. ...After a few days, a negotiation was made. Kaka and his companions were denied admission. They were perhaps transferred to somewhere else. Finally, the college was opened. Meanwhile, the Naxalite upsurge had been launched. The Naxalbari incident was a later phenomenon. In Calcutta, however, the beginning of the Naxalite movement can be traced from this unrest at Hindu Hostel.”¹⁴

Saugata Roy, another student of Presidency College in the mid '60s, who later joined the Congress camp and at present an eminent leader of the Trinamul Congress also observed the scene from the opposition camp and narrated the gradual take over of an elitist institution by 'popular' politics:

“Social life in the College was very pleasant. ...Debates and cricket matches were special occasions in the College and the real heroes of the College were debaters ... and the cricketers.

But this also gave rise to hidden tensions which later took shape in the students' militancy, because it was the smarter boys from the English Medium Schools who dominated those events and cornered the attention of the more attractive girls whereas the brighter boys from *Mofussil* Schools who mostly lived in the Eden Hindu Hostel, felt somewhat ignored.

The other reason that could be attributed to the rise of students' militancy was the Victorian attitude of the teachers who kept themselves totally aloof from the students. They were to be listened to and not talked to....

All these changed in my second year in the College. The SF leadership was taken over by a new batch of boys. Their leader was Ashim Chatterjee.... Ashim was single-handedly responsible for building up links with the SF organisation outside and for recruiting the maximum number of boys from

¹⁴ Ray Rajat Kanta: *Presidency College Smriti* (1963-1967)

Panda Kaustubh ed.: *Nostalgia: An Illustrated History of Hindu-Presidency College (1817-1992)*, Kolkata, 1993, pp. 158-159

the Freshers. It was his personality which later drove him towards the extreme violent path of Naxalism and to induce a number of brilliant students on this futile path.

I was somewhat alarmed by this rise in Leftist militancy. My natural tendency was to react against this. So, when Sudipta and Amit who had now taken over the leadership of PCSO approached me for helping them, I readily agreed. But it was a hopeless fight. The Freshers were totally with the SF and so were the Postgraduates. And after many years, the SF won the College Union elections that year convincingly....

The mood was turning anti-Congress in the State and in March 1966, there was a violent Bangla Bandh which lasted for several days. Presidency College students took an active part in the movement, which included burning of buses and fighting with the police. This was also a big departure from the past when students of the College had remained cocooned in their academic shells.”¹⁵

Dipanjana Raychaudhuri who was an ‘insider’ in this course of change in student politics agreed with his opponent about the ‘hidden tensions’ between ‘the smarter boys from the English Medium Schools’ and ‘the brighter boys from *Mofussil* Schools’ as the social origin of student militancy in Presidency College:

“Actually by that time the students of the Presidency College were sharply divided into two camps and their difference was more social than political. In both of the camps there were exceptions. Yet, there was a general pattern. The students of affluent families receiving education in English-medium schools and following a western model in life-style joined the P.C.S.O., whereas the students coming mostly from the less wealthy families of the sub-urban regions and living in hostels formed the core of the S.F.

These two groups of emotionally charged young boys who were sharply antagonistic to each other in their social position and ideological disposition often fisted among themselves and this was quite natural for them. But it was really shameful to call the professional rowdies who had a political support-base in the Congress for getting involved into such conflicts.

¹⁵ Roy Saugata. *The College in the Mid-Sixties (1964-1969)*, *Nostalgia*, pp. 165-166

To combat this challenge of hooliganism the leftist students of Presidency College too started mobilizing the young boys living in Bhavani Datta Lane, adjacent to the college, along the leftist line. It was a struggle for sheer survival. But this added a new dimension to the movement of Presidency College. An essentially student movement was transformed into a student and youth movement.

Meanwhile the general political instability of the country signaled a great whirlwind in West Bengal. The student and youth movement centring round Presidency College was drawn into its vortex.”¹⁶

Asim Chatterjee who in Saugata Roy's terms was 'single-handedly responsible for building up links with the SF organisation outside' contextualized this internal tension of college life in the general instability of the national life:

“The story of the '60s was essentially a story of shattered dreams. The long spell of colonial bondage had given birth to a romantic vision of liberation in popular minds. A myth of great expectation had grown around 'independence' in popular imagination, particularly in the youth psyche. The depressed and the destitute masses considered 'independence' as a magic lantern that would heal up all wounds of the national life and wash away all sufferings and deprivation by a wave of prosperity. But all these lofty dreams and expectations crumbled into pieces in the '60s. The feeble venture towards capitalism that we had made with the exploitative imperialism on our shoulders and the shackles of feudalism around our feet brought our economy to complete stagnation. We were exposed to the fact that in a regime of dying capitalism all experiments of our 'independent' nation resulted in a defective and impotent economy. The threat of Red china which too was the outcome of our miscalculated border policy for the time being could cover up these wrongs of economy. But soon the blast of war worsened the

¹⁶ Raychaudhuri Dipanjan: *Chhatra Andolan O Presidency College* (Student Movement and The Presidency College)

Collected from Acharya Anil: *Sath Sattarer Chatra Andolan*, pp. 116-117

The P.C.S.O. was alleged to have called some local ruffians who were supposed to be connected with the Congress, to give a lesson to the S.F. students, during the strike in the college.

situation. War-strained economy not only ruined the peasants and workers, but also did not spare the hearth and palace of the middle class and millionaire. The youth movement of the '60s which aimed at finding a new direction for the nation found its genesis in this context."¹⁷

In this context Chatterjee gave an account of this process of growth of 'popular' character of an 'elitist' institution:

"The history of the student movement of Presidency College was essentially a story of struggle of the students and youth of the state as a whole for achieving political rights. ...In my opinion, the decade of the '60s was the most glorious phase in the history of the college. So far it was an elitist institution which was engrossed in academic activities in an atmosphere of boastful isolation. ...But the decade of the '60s tore these covers and set the life of the college in the same tune with that of the general public life of our nation. The college became the chief source of inspiration of the student movement all over Bengal as well as the main base of this movement. The students of this college sacrificed the prospect of good career and the security of family life. By shedding all sorts of egoism they identified themselves with the struggling masses. They were found in the labourer barrack of the factory of Gestkin Williams, in the huts of the peasants of Kalikapur, in the slums of Midnapore, Singbhum and Birbhum. On the other hand, the causes of the students of Presidency College were supported by the tram workers, cultural activists and the entire student community in West Bengal."¹⁸

The sense of deprivation and frustration which a section of the students were suffering from in the college campus was identified with the frustrated and desperate mood of the masses

¹⁷ Chattopadhyay Asim: *Saht Dashaker Yuba-Chhatra Andolon* (Student and Youth Movement of The Sixties and The Seventies), *Desh*, March 5, 1988
Collected from Acharya Anil: *Sath Sattarer Chatra Andolan*, p 14

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 15-16

on the street. In this perspective the ambition of career was transformed into the quest for emancipation and the icons of elitism became the messengers of a populist regime.

The spirit of militancy from which the most elitist institution of the state could not remain immune touched the entire student community in the city and its suburbs. Dipanjan Raychaudhuri explained this mood of the student community in different colleges and the central position of Presidency College in this student radicalism:

“The same spirit animated the other colleges. In early 1968 in Bangabasi College the Student Federation which was the messenger of the new ideas formed the student union by winning 60 seats out of a total of 68. The opposition was formed by *Chhatra Parishad* led by Subrata Mukherjee. During the same period in Scottish Church College and City College (Commerce) too the student unions were formed by the S.F. This was largely acclaimed in College Street Campus. The students of Calcutta University who quitted the B.P.S.F. conference founded their own organization called the P.G.S.F. This too was active for a long period. It created great impulse by raising a movement for changing the curriculum of the Department of Political Science in the university through the incorporation of the Marxian political thought. In other words, in the programmes of all such student organizations the needs of the student community were combined with their responses to the critical issues of the larger society and politics.

...The Naxalbari movement which left the blind alley of the older leftism and unveiled a new horizon immediately captivated the imagination of these enthusiastic young minds. A number of young people from various colleges and localities of Calcutta and the districts of South Bengal assembled in the lawn of Presidency College and interacted among themselves. The outcome of it was the Presidency Consolidation of the students and youth.

...Many other students from R. G. Kar Medical College, N.R.S. Medical College, Veterinary College, B.E. College and many other institutions joined the movement. Some worked temporarily, the others were attached to the movement for a long period. But all of them spent a valuable part of their lives in search of emancipation of mankind.”¹⁹

It was through the initiative of these militant students that the wave of radicalism from the hilly terrain of Naxalbari flooded the plains. Asim Chatterjee, the pivotal figure of the student radicalism, traced the history of this fusion since his encounter with Charu Mazumdar, the godfather of this new radicalism:

“Some people think that the youth movement of the '60s was the outcome of the agrarian outburst at Naxalbari. No doubt, the Naxalbari upsurge added a new dimension to the communist movement in India. But we cannot ignore the historical truth that the youth movement of the '60s had found its genesis and developed its own identity long before the explosive incidents of Naxalbari took place. On the contrary, the right explanation should be that the youth community found in the Naxalbari outburst the fulfilment of their dream and looked to it for chalking out the right way of their actions. Some people think late Charu Mazumdar as the founder of the youth movement. Of course, the credit goes to Mazumdar for studying the pulse of the youth community and utilizing their spirit in implementing his programme. With due respect to his contribution to the youth movement, we must say that the credit of the origin of the movement does not go to him. However, it is undeniable that the youth movement grew independently. We were introduced to Charu Mazumdar in August-September 1967. The City of Calcutta raised its first voice of protest against the police firing in

¹⁹ Raychaudhuri Dipanjan: *Chhatra Andolan O Presidency College*, pp. 122-123 During the middle of the '60s the leftist students of Presidency College formed two parallel organizations both of which ran under the same name – S.F. One group was connected with the CPI(M) supported B.P.S.F. (Bengal Provincial Student Federation) and the other represented the radical face of the leftist politics. The graduates from Presidency College who then studied in Calcutta University along with the other radical leftist students of the post-graduate level too denied the B.P.S.F. leadership and formed the P.G.S.F. along the radical line.

Naxalbari through our posters put up near Presidency College on the very next day of the incident. But by then we did not have any direct contact with Naxalbari. We ourselves rendered our moral support to the upsurge of Naxalbari and decided to go to the countryside to sustain the agrarian revolution. I was introduced to Charubabu at this critical juncture. The meeting was arranged by late leader Sushital Raychaudhuri. Sushitalda had some reservation about our rural programme. His idea was that the youth activists should go to villages only after gathering sufficient experience and getting approval from the AICCCR. He considered the Co-ordination Committee as the stepping-stone of the party formation but we treated it as a platform for propagating the political ideology of the Naxalbari upsurge. During my meeting with Charubabu we discussed all these matters. I still remember that listening to everything Charuda told Sushitalda, 'During Joshi's tenure we had championed revisionism; during Ranadive's period we had championed sectarianism. We, the people of older generation, cannot always appreciate something which the youngmen can feel by their common sense.' Charuda gave his consent to our proposal and made an impression on us."²⁰

ii) In Rural Fields

The land question which created discontent in the plantation region found its parallels in the planes too. Violation of land ceiling through illegal holdings by the big landowners, deprivation of the peasantry from the fair price of agricultural

²⁰ Chattopadhyay Asim: *Saht Dashaker Yuba-Chhatra Andolon*, pp 17-18

On November 13, 1967 the representatives of the dissident groups of the CPI(M) of nearly all states except Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Assam, Orissa and Jammu-Kashmir met at a covention with the group which led the Naxalbari struggle. In this meeting the declaration was made about the foundation of the All India Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR). The manifesto of this Committee trivialized the significance of the split of the Communist Party in 1964 as the outcome of sheer factionalism and personal rivalries rather than any ideological debate. It accused the CPI(M) as equally revisionists and opportunists as its counterpart the CPI, and declared the need of launching a full-scale revolution to channelize the growing popular discontent to a proper direction. (Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*)

products, eviction of the small owners from their possessions, unjust wage for the agricultural labourers and all such cases of agrarian injustice were no less apparent in the rural planes than in the hilly tracts. Naturally the Naxalites found here a ready field to extend their influence.

A report submitted by Ram Prasad Das, the Secretary to the West Bengal State Committee of Jana Sangha – a party which had no sympathy for the communists – mentioned that:

“...Naxalbari was not an isolated incident. Terrorist activities were being perpetrated in an organized manner all over West Bengal in accordance with a well-calculated plan. Mr. Das mentioned incidents of lawlessness at Ranaghat, Howrah, Sonarpur, Behrampur and Malda which, he said, were not stray incidents. “That Naxalbari is being repeated in all and every village of West Bengal is a remark that can be heard from all Marxists.”²¹

There might have been an overemphasis on the impact of the Naxalbari incident but the report clearly revealed the tension-ridden situation in rural Bengal. Amiya Samanta, a police officer who in 1967 had been posted in Nadia, a region where the Naxalites posed a serious threat to the state power found a ‘just cause’ in the Naxalites’ demand over land. In his words:

“There were numerous examples of illegal landholding in many places of Nadia like Nakashipara, Kaliganj were numerous. A common sight in those places was miles of land cultivated with paddy or wheat and one or two mango trees in the midst of them. These tracts of land were possessed by the local landlords who by planting one or two mango trees marked those lands as orchards and thus evaded the laws of land ceiling. Thus the deprivation of the actual tillers from the ownership of a large volume of land continued. Naturally, when the Naxalites launched their upsurge with the objective of redistribution of land, I found their cause justified.”²²

²¹ *The Statesman*, July 2, 1967

²² Interview with Amiya Samanta, January 2005

In rural planes, the most popular method of class struggle was physical liquidation of the individuals who were identified by the radicals as class enemies. The annihilation programme was widely implemented in some of the police stations of Midnapore, Birbhum, Nadia and some other districts, and places like Debra, Gopiballabhpur, Keshpur, Krishnanagar, Aranghata became virtual 'red zones'.²³ In the actions for annihilation local people took part. But the main initiative was taken by the students and young party activists deputed from Calcutta. Dipanjan Raychaudhuri narrated this interactive process of urban and rural militancy:

"The politically conscious students of Presidency College and other colleges acted as messengers. They carried the new ideas to their own localities, urban and rural. The close connections of the different zones of the city of Calcutta which in turn was connected with a large part of South Bengal was made possible because of the groundwork of these student activists.

Asoke Sengupta and Sudev of Presidency College who were in Howrah-Hoogly region made contacts with many young boys and girls. ...In Nadia, particularly in Krishnanagar, from where many of our activists were recruited, our first source of contact was Amal Sanyal of Presidency College. ...In northern and southern parts of the District of 24 Parganas too the students' actions made a great fury. ...When Santosh Rana who was a student of Science College went back to his own village at Midnapore, he established contacts with the students and youths of Gopiballabhpur-Jhargram-Khargapur. ...Anup Acharya of Maulana Azad College too returned to Assansol."²⁴

²³ *The Statesman & Hindustan Standard*, 1968

²⁴ Raychaudhuri Dipanjan: *Chhatra Andolan O Presidency College*, p. 124

iii) In Urban Pockets

The third phase of the Naxalite movement saw its urban proliferation, particularly in Calcutta. But, though belated, the movement acquired a greater vigour here. The students and the intelligentsia, who had already received their intellectual training and carried their message to the rural masses, now found a familiar atmosphere to perform secret actions. In detecting and annihilating the class enemies, however, Charu Mazumdar suggested caution. In a letter written to the comrades at Dalhousie Square in Calcutta on November 18, 1971 he mentioned:

“All the Government officers are not our enemies. We should target only those who are corrupt and enemies of the people. Besides, we should also remember that as revolution would progress, those officers would also change. In the commercial concerns we would mark only those officers who are actively cooperating with the police.”²⁵

In other words, though the Naxalites identified certain social categories and professions as enemy classes, they did not brand all the members of those segments as their class enemies. Only those who for the sake of their own class interests stood in the way of realizing the vision of a classless society were targeted.

In urban areas the programme of annihilation was supplemented by a campaign to boycott educational institutions and iconoclasm. According to the Naxalite ideology, a revolution would not likely be brought about by physical annihilation of the class enemies alone. It was also necessary to dismantle the ideological foundation on which the class structure was laid. Hence the educational institutions and the statues of the dead

²⁵ Collected from Houque Ajijul: *Naxalbari: Tirish Bachhar Age Ebn Pare*, p. 65

politicians and intellectuals, who symbolized the value system of the bourgeoisie tied to imperialist interests, needed to be destroyed. A police officer who was in the detective department and played an active role in dealing with the Naxalites in Calcutta explained the network of Naxalite organizations in his memoirs:

“The office of the Naxalite student outfit was located in a rented house at Bhavani Dutta Lane behind Presidency College. At the first step, ‘Red Books’ were circulated among the students. Reading the books within three days they had discussions among themselves. They were injected with the idea that the initiation into Naxalite politics would be a pre-condition to serve the nation. Besides, those who had greater physical and mental strength among the newcomers were identified and clubbed with some of the old cadres to form a new group. Each of the leaders had three or four groups. Then sub-leaders were selected from the new groups. Thus the Naxalites spread all over the city.

By that time most of the top-ranking Naxal leaders had personal assistants. They also developed a courier service of their own. These couriers conveyed messages to the leaders’ houses or to the meeting places. Sometimes, the supporters of the Naxalites rented post-boxes where the Naxalites sent letters. Later, the couriers collected and circulated them. This courier system was very effective. In some places the women too acted as couriers.”²⁶

Regarding their mode of action he identified a few main features:

a) “They raised a slogan to annihilate the class enemies. However, I never understood who those class enemies were. Their mouthpiece, *Deshabrati*, had never been tired of propagating such commands: “Kill the class enemies; annihilate them.”

The first category of people which they targeted as class enemy was the police, particularly the traffic police. The big moneylenders were marked as the second category of class enemy. In Calcutta, however, the police was the main target of attack. They felt that the killing of policemen would easily terrorize people.

²⁶ Ray Debiprasad: *Arakshar Britta Theke* (From The Police Circle), Kolkata, 2000, pp. 59-62

...Very often they murdered the traffic police in a cruel manner to demoralize the whole police force. While murdering, they usually snatched the rifles of the policemen. Also they left many signs of cruelty to alarm people. We got no help from people. Nor did we expect it. During that period the Naxalites murdered as many as 51 policemen.”

b) “In most cases these murders were committed not by the students who recently joined the party but by the wagon breakers and other criminals. The calculation was that if such persons could be involved in the politics of murder and bloodshed, it would be easier for them to destabilize normal life. In such condition they would be able to carry on their activities smoothly. Actually, the hooligans murdered and the newly recruited political cadres of the party who accompanied them in such actions got accustomed with the homicidal activities.”

c) “The weapons which the Naxalites generally used were choppers, daggers, swords, pipe guns, etc. Whatever sophisticated arms they did have were mostly snatched away from the police. They also robbed off guns, revolvers and other firearms from the civilians who possessed them.”²⁷

The Naxalite ideology was received with much enthusiasm by a section of people, particularly students and youth, poor peasants and workers, who had been tired of electoral power-game and slow-moving constitutional reforms, and were enthused by the Naxalites’ promise of an immediate change. Militancy appeared to them as a natural way for expressing discontent. From this section the Naxalites recruited the majority of their ranks and leaders. But even among those who did not join the party nor actively participate in politics, a tacit sympathy for these dedicated workers was not uncommon. The mainstream Communist Parties which were alleged to have devitalized the communist movement were also accused of betraying the people by practising parliamentarism. The Naxalite ideologues, on the other hand, claimed that they were salvaging communism from

²⁷ Ibid.

the ideological deviation and the political stupor by setting it on the right course. The enthusiastic response of the people, particularly the younger generation, too, according to them, could be explained in terms of this achievement. A contemporary pro-naxalite publication *Frontier* commented on the speedy growth of the Naxalite action with reference to the rejuvenation of the communist movement through militant radicalism and the renewal of popular expectation about it:

“In most of the towns, younger people are turning more and more to the Naxalites. The CP (M) leaders can hardly attract this generation because of their stereotyped economic slogans and the growing gap between revolutionary precept and parliamentary practice. In essence, the areas where the CP (M) has come organizationally into conflict with the CP (ML) supporters, the actual fights take place between the old generation who are psychologically inert or lukewarm on the question of status quo (which they hope may offer them good dividends in terms of MLAs, MPs and ministry-making) and the younger generation who find no ray of hope (not even parliamentary rewards) and therefore find nothing to lose from the quick destruction of the system. In the middle strata areas, therefore, it is a fight between superstitions craving for parliamentary rewards resulting in conservatism in practice, and frustrated impatience over the existing state of affairs leading to some adventurist actions.”²⁸

Prasanta Chattopadhyay who had been a student of Science College, Calcutta University in 1966-67 to join the Naxalite rank reflected the feeling of the Naxalite youth:

“In each issue of *Deshabhati* a map was displayed on the first page. The zones of annihilation were pointed out in the map. We eagerly counted the number of those zones. The increase in their number meant to us the spread of our revolutionary struggle.”²⁹

²⁸ Bose B.: In and Around Jadavpur (*Frontier*, May 16, 1970)

²⁹ Interview with Prasanta Chattopadhyay, at present a professor of B.K.C. College and the editor of a periodical *Kaladhwani*, December 2004

Even the CPI(M) which continued a relentless counter attack on the Naxalite ideology and also debunked their adventurous programme could not ignore the impact of Naxalism on young minds. If the militant adventurism was 'an ideological disease of frustrated individuals' the germs of this disease could be traced in the political and economic crisis of the country and the failure of the constitutional left parties to tackle it. An official document of the CPI(M) admitted that:

"Due to the growing economic crisis and desperation, impatience and frustrations are growing and the mass struggle as yet have not developed to that pitch where they could be seen as the effective means of fighting the present regime. Lack of Marxism-Leninism, failure of the Party to transform this militancy into revolutionary fervour – all create a situation in which the appeal of left doctrinairism remains."³⁰

An anti-naxalite intellectual of the CPI(M) found the root of the Naxalite insurgency in the militant tradition of the leftist movement in the state and viewed this outburst as a challenge to the growing anti-militancy of the mainstream left politics. The following comments in his book are extremely suggestive:

"Only in West Bengal did the Naxalites become strong enough in 1970-71, at the time of their urban campaign to be reckoned a powerful force in political life. But why in West Bengal?

Part of the explanation lies in the sentimental attachment of the Bengali middle class to the heroic activities of their terrorist compatriots....

But perhaps more important than the terrorist past was the militant tradition of left-wing mass movements in the fifties....

³⁰ On Left Deviation or Left Opportunism, adopted by the Central Committee of the CPI(M) at Madurai, August 18-27, 1967

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, Vol.-XI, 1965-67, p. 831

These movements on simple and popular issues, but under a leftwing banner, helped to polarize radical anti-Congress opinion around a United Front, which now emerged as an alternative to the ruling party.

...The relevance of these experiences of the fifties to the Naxalite movement could not be found in their united front tactics because the Naxalites rejected the idea of untied fronts. But both the leftwing nature of Bengal politics and its tradition of militant confrontation with the authorities were significant factors in the growth of Naxalism."³¹

He wrote further:

"Naxalite activities never posed a serious threat to the central government. On the contrary, as a consequence of the Naxalite attitude to CPI(M) at a time CPI(M) was growing rapidly and the political mood of the state was left-oriented, the Naxalites became consciously or unconsciously, an ally of Congress in its fight for political control of the state against CPI(M). The Naxalite assault on CPI(M), both ideological and physical, came only when slogans to the left of CPI(M) could prove effective against it. The Naxalite uprisings in rural areas under the united front governments weakened the moral position of CPI(M); it was forced either to support the uprisings, which would have meant their acceptance of the Naxalite ideological position or to suppress them, which would have been an agonising task for a party committed to socialist revolution, or to contain without suppressing, the line CPI(M) took in Debra-Gopiballavpore and which made it the target of attack from both right and left. The Naxalites attack on CPI(M) in Calcutta were expected to prove that CPI(M) was a "paper tiger" despite its revolutionary pretensions, and the Naxalites hoped this would produce a landslide of defection from the CPI(M) ranks to their side. CPI(M) was bound to lose either way by the activities of the Naxalites. Its clashes with them discredited every organization which bore the label communist and thus help the anti-communist forces. The Naxalite activities were used by the government in Delhi as an excuse for not holding elections in West Bengal in 1970-71 when CPI(M) was the likeliest party to win

³¹ Dasgupta Biplab: *The Naxalite Movement*, Kolkata, 1974, p. 218-220

power, and the authoritarian measures introduced to combat violence were used against all left-wing groups, including CPI(M) and Naxalites. Lastly, the impossible happened, these activities became instrumental in ensuring the revival of Congress politically in the state after 1971.”³²

In other words, the Naxalite challenge could weaken at least to some degree the moral base of the mainstream communist movement in the state and paved the way for the eventual rise of the non-communist forces.

iv) Outside West Bengal

The Naxalite programmes and actions aroused enthusiasm in other parts of India as well. The Naxalbari experiment was virtually repeated in Srikakulam in Andhra in October 1967. The *girijans* or the tribal people living in the hilly terrain of Srikakulam were victims of indebtedness, evacuation from land, deprivation of fair price of agricultural products and other forms of exploitations, which the people of Naxalbari were suffering from. The extremist section of the CPI(ML) under the leadership of such men like Vemtapu Satyanarayan and Kailashan mobilized militant actions both against the exploitation of the moneylenders and the police atrocities. The movement soon spread to Guntur, Vizagapattanam and some other places of Andhra affecting both agrarian fields and urban factories. The militant tone of the people of Naxalbari and Srikakulam was echoed in Muzaffarpur in Bihar, in Kheri, Nainital, Unao and many other places of Uttar Pradesh, adjacent to Nepal border. The All India Co-ordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) that had been formed by the dissident groups of the CPI(M) all over the country tended to

³² Ibid. p. 226

form a unity of action and opinions among the militant activists. A number of publications like *Liberation*, *Deshabrati*, *Lok Yuddh* maintained the ideological sustenance to these violent actions.³³

The Tenets of Naxalite Ideology

As the Naxalites spread their activities, their ideology too was formulated and propagated in a number of pamphlets, party documents and other writings in the party mouthpieces. These writings most of which were penned by Charu Mazumdar highlighted three things: First, they emphasized the immediacy of the Indian revolution. Second, nothing less than armed struggle was considered effective to accomplish such a revolution. Third, a layout of the post-revolutionary People's State was also made. In the programme which Mazumdar chalked out for armed agrarian revolution to build up the People's State Power he gave the following instructions:

i) The first of the guidelines for forming the guerrilla unit was the maintenance of complete secrecy. The unit, as it was instructed, should be kept secret from those among the local people whose consciousness had not yet reached the required level and even from those party units which had not yet fully mastered the methods and discipline required for illegal work.

ii) Although the guerrilla units were instructed to work secretly, Mazumdar also stressed the need for their mass contact. He knew that isolation from the broad peasant masses was a political weakness on the part of the revolutionaries. This danger

³³ i) Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*

ii) Damas Marius: *Approaching Naxalbari*, Kolkata, 1991

could appear at the every stage of the struggle. So, to avoid this, he advised the guerrilla forces in Maoist term: "Divide your forces to arouse the masses, concentrate your forces to deal with the enemy."

iii) It was imperative, therefore, that before proceeding to form a guerrilla unit the peasants must be made conscious of the politics of seizure of political power by armed forces. But though propaganda was essential, Mazumdar at the same time made it clear that it would be wrong to put too much emphasis on the importance of carrying on intensive propaganda before starting the guerrilla attacks. Masses, according to him, would only be aware of the fact that political power would have to be seized by armed forces.

iv) Though the guerrilla units were expected to be located primarily in rural areas, the initiative to form them, according to Mazumdar, should come from the petty bourgeois intellectuals. Mazumdar hoped that those urban intellectuals should be deputed to villages to spread revolutionary message among the rural masses and then by assessing their revolutionary potentiality recruit the rural people in the guerrilla units.

v) However, Mazumdar was aware of the necessity to maintain the class character of the guerrilla units. Hence his idea was that though the urban intelligentsia should prepare the groundwork, the peasants' army should be commanded by the members of their own class. Mazumdar instructed to elect the commanders from among the poor and landless peasants in the area and on regional basis.

vi) To maintain the secrecy of existence and the mobility of function the guerrilla units were expected to be formed as small and well-knit groups. The members in one unit generally

were not to be numbered more than seven. The yardstick for judging the members' commitment would be their eagerness and capability to annihilate class enemies.

vii) As for the plan of action, it was instructed that the peasant masses in each of the villages should be roused for liberating their own village. It was decided that the peasants would have to seize power locally in their respective areas and by ousting the feudal exploiters they would become the sole authority in settling all their local affairs. The action for liberation would start with the elimination of the local class enemies. However, Mazumdar feared that to remain confined in waging attack against only class enemies would amount to a certain form of economism. Hence, according to him, it was necessary to wage attacks against the armed forces of the enemy simultaneously with the attack against the class enemies individually. It was expected that once an area would be liberated from the clutches of class enemies, the repressive state machinery would collapse. The revolutionary committee then would undertake the programme of reconstruction. In the process the people's state power would be established.

viii) Traditional weapons, rather than modern firearms, were given importance for conducting guerrilla actions.

ix) Mazumdar also gave emphasis on the need for inspiring the peasant cadres with the spirit of revolutionary internationalism because the armed agrarian revolution in India was, according to him, a part of the world revolution.

x) Finally, the role of the party was defined as the primary force for organizing and supervising the implementation of the revolutionary programme. Mazumdar made a list of what this party would do and what it would not. A revolutionary party,

according to this list, would not be a party to fight election campaigns, nor would it be based on cities. A revolutionary party could not be an open party, nor could its main concern be to publish Party papers, nor could it depend on the revolutionary intellectuals. Revolutionary intellectuals could, of course, help in building such a revolutionary party. These well-read people could tell the workers and peasants about the revolutionary struggles in different countries and about communist thinking. But Mazumdar warned that in most cases the revolutionary intellectuals proved themselves to be hindrances to the free development of the workers' and peasants' party units and did not try to enhance the initiative of those units. Hence he never allowed them to forget the teaching of Chairman Mao that the masses were the real heroes.³⁴

After the successful accomplishment of the revolution the People's Democratic State was expected to take over power. Mazumdar also outlined the assignments of this revolutionary state. Summarily these were the following:

a) Confiscation of all banks and enterprises of the foreign capital and liquidation of all imperialist debts.

b) Confiscation of all enterprises of the comprador-bureaucrat capitalists.

c) Confiscation of all land belonging to the landlords and their redistribution among the landless and poor peasants on the principle of land to the tillers; cancellation of all debts of the peasantry and other toiling people. All facilities necessary for development of agriculture were guaranteed.

³⁴ Mazumdar Charu: Undertake the Work of Building A Revolutionary Party *Liberation*, Vol -1, No-12, October 1968

d) Enforcement of eight hours of work per day, increase of wages, instituting unemployment relief and social insurance, removal of all inequalities on the basis of equal payment for the same work.

e) Improvement of the living conditions of the soldiers and giving land and job to the ex-servicemen.

f) Enforcement of better living conditions of the people and removal of unemployment.

g) Development of new democratic culture in place of colonial and feudal culture.

h) Abolition of the present educational system and educational institutions and building up of a new educational system and new educational institutions consistent with the needs of People's Democratic India.

i) Abolition of caste system, removal of all social inequalities and discrimination on religious ground, and guarantee of equality of status to women.

j) Unification of India and recognition of the right of self-determination.

k) Giving equal status to all national languages.

l) Abolition of all exorbitant taxes and miscellaneous assessments, and adoption of a consolidated progressive tax system.

m) Exercise of people's political power through Revolutionary People's Councils at all levels.

n) Formation of alliance with the international proletariat and the oppressed nations of the world under the leadership of the CPC.³⁵

³⁵ Programme of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)-adopted at the Party Congress held in May 1970

Collected from *Liberation* Vol.-III-No 7-9 (May-July, 1970)

Interestingly, the promises of the radical left did not sound much differently from the promises made by the parliamentary wings of communism. The novelty of radicalism lay in the methods of achieving this goal. The radicals had no illusion about the effectiveness of peaceful means to change the power structure. No electoral manoeuvre but only armed intervention, according to them, could fundamentally alter the situation. Charu Mazumdar declared in no uncertain term that

“...in the present era the sole criterion to judge whether a party is revolutionary or not is whether the party is directing an armed struggle or not.”³⁶ On another occasion he said:

“...our political principle is “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”³⁷ Mazumdar’s optimism about an immediate revolution led him to argue:

“In the present era when imperialism is heading towards total collapse, revolutionary struggle in every country has taken the form of armed struggle; Soviet revisionism, unable to retain its mask of socialism, has been forced to adopt imperialist tactics; world revolution has entered a new higher phase; and socialism is marching irrepressibly forward to victory—in such an era, to take to the parliamentary road means stopping this onward march of world revolution.”³⁸

³⁶ Mazumdar Charu: United Front and the Revolutionary Party, *Liberation* Vol-1, No-9, July 1968

³⁷ *Comrade Charu Mazumdar's Call*;

Seize The Rifles and Arm The Peasant Guerrilla Squads (February 23, 1971) *Liberation*, January-March 1971

³⁸ Mazumdar Charu : Boycott Elections! International Significance of the Slogan, *Liberation* Vol. – II, No. – 2, December 1968

The present Indian state and society too, according to Mazumdar, fulfilled the objective conditions for revolution. He assessed:

“An excellent revolutionary situation prevails now in our country with all its classical symptoms as enunciated by Comrade Lenin. But the neo-revisionist leadership of the CPI(M) has betrayed the people and the party. They have betrayed the cause of the Indian Revolution.”³⁹

Charu Mazumdar published a series of eight documents in which he explained the revolutionary content of the present Indian situation and formulated the party's programme accordingly.⁴⁰

In those writings Mazumdar tried to prove that India in the mid-1960s was passing through a crisis of capitalism. The long-

³⁹ Declaration of The Revolutionaries in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) AICCCR and CPI (M-L) Documents, *Liberation* Vol.-1, No-2 (December 1967)

⁴⁰ These eight documents are:

- i) *Bartaman Abasthay Amader Kartabya* (Our Duties in The Present Situation)
 - ii) *Shodhanbader Biruddhe Sangram Kare Janaganatantrik Biplabke Saphul Kare Tulun* (Struggle against Revisionism and Hail with People's Democratic Revolution)
 - iii) *Bharater Swatasphurta Baiprabik Ucchwaser Utsa Ki* (What Sustains The Spontaneity of India's Revolutionary Enthusiasm)
 - iv) *Adhunik Shodhanbader Biruddhe Sangram Chaliye Jan* (Continuous Struggle against Present Revisionism)
 - v) *1965 Sal Ki Sambhhabanar Nirdesh Dichchhe* (What Are The Indications of Future in 1965)
 - vi) *Sanshodhanbader Biruddhe Apashin Sangramer Madhya Diye Sachcha Biplabi Party Gare Tolar Sangrami Ekhankar Pradhan Kaj* (Our Foremost Responsibility Is Now to Build A Truly Revolutionary Party through Incessant Struggle against Revisionism)
 - vii) *Sanshodhanbader Biruddhe Sangram Kare Sashastra Partyjan Sangram Gare Tulun* (Vow for An Armed Partisan Struggle Condemning Revisionism)
 - viii) *Sanshodhanbader Biruddhe Sangram Karei Krishak Sangramke Egie Niye Jete Habe* (Progress of Peasant Struggle Lies through Struggle against Revisionism)
- Published between January 1965-April 1967

drawn nexus of the Indian bourgeoisie with the Anglo-American capitalist classes, according to him, prevented the growth of India's economic independence and submerged the country in a condition of instability that manifested itself in recurring food crisis and the popular riots in protest. The political repression and the dictatorial control too were consequently viewed as a desperate attempt by a capitalist government to sustain itself amidst a swelling crisis. But, according to Mazumdar's assessment, these only endangered Indian democracy and also made an assault on the small bourgeoisie whose freedom was drastically curtailed. The result was that the scope of generating indigenous capital was further squeezed. Thus there emerged a crisis within capitalism by the growing conflict between monopoly capitalists having connections with foreign imperialism and the petty bourgeoisie. On the other hand, a sense of deprivation in both economic security and political rights made the masses, in general, a discontented and turbulent group.

The task of the communists, according to Mazumdar, therefore, should be to exploit the internal crisis of capitalism and to train the popular forces to build up an alternative power structure. The communist initiative was all the more necessary because Mazumdar feared that without proper political training in radical leftism the spontaneous outburst of popular discontent could have been diffused, derailed and deformed by the revisionist spirit. Again, the party also appreciated the complex character of agrarian exploitation which was nourished in a feudal structure having constant intervention of the agents of capitalism in it. Therefore, to accomplish a full-fledged agrarian revolution the party formulated a twofold programme of abolishing feudalism and destroying the comprador-bureaucratic classes.

The struggle against internal enemies was meant to be supplemented by the fight against imperialism. Interestingly, the CPI(ML) not only launched its struggle against the capitalistic imperialism of the US but also detected the virus of social imperialism in the Soviet model of communism. They argued that far from creating a classless society the communist experiment in the Soviet Union had given birth to a new class of bourgeoisie which was motivated by private profit. This class was alleged to have brought the state, party machinery as well as the means of production under centralized control and acted in a dictatorial style. Internally, this new bourgeois rule spread a network of exploitation over the working masses. The external policy of this ruling class too, instead of promoting the fraternity of the international working class, tried to maintain and extend its own class interests. For this purpose, it was said that, on the one hand, it resorted to collaboration, co-operation and conciliation with the US and other imperialists, and, on the other hand, it acted to exploit the under-developed nations. With this argument the radical leftists severely criticized the pro-Soviet stance of the Congress Government and some of the communist wings. They particularly detested the Soviet aid which, according to them, was supplied with a profiteering motive rather than any genuine intention of uplifting India's developing economy.⁴¹ Thus the Naxalites invoked the experience of the late '40s when the undivided Communist Party under Ranadive leadership launched a vigorous experiment in radicalism against the revisionist inaction. The Naxalite phase, however, in its experiment of bloody adventurism far surpassed all the preceding communist initiatives in the country.

⁴¹ *Nishad*. Soviet Social Imperialism's Stranglehold Over India *Liberation* Vol-II, no 4, February 1969

As for the party structure, the supreme authority was held by the Central Committee which was formulated in the party congress, and which in turn constructed the Politburo and other standing committees. At the state level a State Committee was built up through the state conference of the party, although these State Committees were subject to change by the Central Committee. Below the State Committee organizational power percolated into a hierarchy of regional committees, area committees and cells.⁴²

The ideas and programme of Charu Mazumdar, however, were often marked by inner contradictions and inconsistencies. Suniti Ghosh who was a close associate of Mazumdar in a retrospective assessment of his leader tried to trace the evolution of Mazumdar's 'line' and also identified various stages of its modification:

a) During the period from 1965 to 1969 Charu Mazumdar emphasized the essentiality of mass organizations and mass struggles. He also appreciated the role of economic struggle and himself gave a call for it to serve the purpose of political struggle for power. Suniti Ghosh referred to such writings of Mazumdar like *Shodhonbader Biruddhe Sangram Kare Ganatantrik Biplab Saphal Karun* (1965), *Sanshodhanbader Biruddhe Sangram Karei Krishak Sangramke Egie Niye Jete Habe* (1967), *Comradeder Prati* (To The Comrades) (1968).

b) The line of 'action' began to take shape since the late 1969. Ghosh noted this turn in such writings of Mazumdar at this phase like *Sanshodhanbader Nirdista Prakashgulir Biruddhe Larai Karun* (Fight against The Specific Manifestations of Revisionism); *Bharater Biplabi Krishak*

⁴² Houque Ajijul: *Naxalbari: Tirish Bachhar Age Ebn Pare*

Sangramer Abhignatar Sarsankalan Kare Egie Chalun (Derive Lessons from The Experiences of The Revolutionary Peasant Movement in India and Go Ahead); *Guerrilla "Action" Samparke Kayekti Katha* (A Few Words about Guerrilla Action); *Birat Abhyutthaner Janya Prastut Hao, Egie Jao* (Prepare and Proceed for A Great Experience); *Shramik Shrenir Madhye Amader Partir Kaj* (The Duties of Our Party among The Working Class), in the party programme called *Rajnaitik Sangathanik Report* (Politico-Organizational Report). According to this line, imparting political teaching to the poor and landless peasants the party would form small secret groups with them. These groups would organize guerrilla attack on the class enemies. By annihilating the class enemies, and by destroying their social, economic and political domination they would liberate a zone, and would organize a revolutionary committee with the leadership of the poor and landless peasants. The revolutionary committee would then launch full-fledged people's revolution to capture land and grain on the one hand, and the state power, on the other. This 'line', however, mentioned it clearly that popular organization or popular movement should be mobilized only after the annihilation of class enemies in a particular area was complete. Without annihilation, according to this line, popular initiative would rather mar the revolution. Similarly in urban areas, the party cadres would not organize or lead any popular body like trade union in factories and students union in colleges. The party members would not oppose the labour movement on economic issues. But they would not take part in it. On the contrary, the party would form its own units among the workers to politically mobilize them. Annihilation was propagated as the stepping-stone of guerrilla warfare and the ultimate solution to all problems.

c) A related theme was the issue of 'revolutionary authority'. According to this principle, Charubabu could demand complete loyalty from his followers to his line as unquestionable and infallible. In the party Congress of 1970, however, the opinion got divided on this issue of authority. Finally, it was resolved that the report would subscribe to the special position of Charu Mazumdar but not his supreme authority in the party.

d) Since the end of 1971, Charu Mazumdar, according to Ghosh, once again began to appreciate the necessity of mass struggle on economic issues. He cited from one of Mazumdar's note written on November 18, 1971, about the party's work in rural field: 'The struggle for seizure for crops is a mass struggle. In our way of armed struggle we for the first time undertake such a line of mass action. This would aim at bringing the marginal peasants within the fold of our struggle. Without such mass action we cannot fulfil our objective of making each tiller a warrior.' The idea of annihilation too, which he considered with such high esteem, gradually disappeared from his writings. Suniti Ghosh mentioned of a letter which Mazumdar wrote to his wife on the day of his arrest (July 14, 1972). Here he wrote:

"We have put too much importance to annihilation. It is a serious fault. However, the critics within the party have been vocal. So, we would overcome our limitations. Our party is too young and inexperienced. So, such mistake is not unnatural. But hopefully our comrades have been aware of it and this awareness would matter."

Suniti Ghosh concluded his assessment about his leader with the remark:

"No doubt, before his arrest and martyrdom he revised his idea about annihilation. He also discarded his claim for 'revolutionary authority' and reverted to his older position. Finally, he admitted that our party was too young and inexperienced to escape deviations but would rectify itself through inner party criticism."

But Ghosh admitted the bitter truth that “But by then nearly in all parts of the state our strength was totally exhausted.”⁴³

Combating Radicalism: Right and Left Responses

A strong counter-offensive was launched against the Naxalites. Not only the bourgeois-landlord class and the Congress Party opposed the Naxalites, the leftist coalition in the UF Governments too was no less offensive against them. Apart from the organized police force the cadres of the Communist Parties too were deployed to combat the Naxalite terror. The subsequent Congress regime which came to power after the fall of the second UF government heightened the police violence.⁴⁴ At the face of this organized repression the movement gradually petered out.

The challenge of the Naxalites, however, could not be met by force alone. They brought into public gaze some crucial questions of economy and economic relations which the ruling parties and their class brethren could not ignore. For the Communist Parties the challenge was even more severe because the Naxalites questioned the legitimacy of their policies and methods of action. Hence both of the Communist Parties issued pamphlets and opened ideological campaigns against these radical outfits.

B.T. Ranadive of the CPI(M) who himself had once been accused of indulging in ‘left-adventurism’ alleged that the Naxalites were practising violence without a concrete

⁴³ Ghosh Suniti Kumar: *Charu Mazumdar O Communist Andolone Biplabi Dhara* (Charu Mazumdar and The Revolutionary Trend of The Communist Movement) *Anik: Naxalbari Panchis Bachhar* (Anik: 25 Years of Naxalbari), Kolkata, (September-October 1992), pp. 78-80

⁴⁴ Mondal Pulakesh & Mitra Jaya ed.: *Sei Dashak* (That Decade), Kolkata, 1994

programme of mass struggle. On this issue he contributed in a series of articles to *People's Democracy* during July-August 1967 and February-March 1968. He agreed that the electoral process and the parliamentary activities should be subordinated to the main aim of organizing the revolution. But he found no need of boycotting the election as constraint towards revolutionary development. Rather he considered electoral practice as a lever of mass consciousness. Similarly, he criticized the ultra left attitude of looking to trade union activities as a reformist practice. Rather, like electoralism, trade unionism too was considered as a means of raising socialist consciousness. This attitude, he feared that, would delink the party from mass struggle and disrupt the class unity. He concludes therefore:

“Thus the ‘Lefts’ here are committing a double error. In the first place, they are advocating forms of struggle in isolation from the needs of the movement, its consciousness, and secondly, they argue as if all other forms of struggle have exhausted their possibility and to them is just revisionism.”⁴⁵

The CPI also started an ideological battle against the radical Maoists. Mohit Sen, an intellectual protagonist of the CPI, found a methodological error in the Naxalite appropriation of the Marxist-Leninist principle. He approved of the Naxalite idea of class struggle aiming at the capture of political power under proletarian hegemony as the cardinal tenet of Marxian socialism. But he detected the intellectual poverty of the Naxalites in their single-minded concern about armed revolution. He commented:

“What Marxism-Leninism resolutely opposed to is absolutism of any particular form of struggle or revolution. Peaceful and armed struggle, civil war and peaceful transition – neither is better nor worse than the other. It all

⁴⁵ Ranadive B. T.: On Left Adventurism
People's Democracy, July-August 1967

depends on the concrete situation in which the revolutionary forces happen to be operating. For example, it would be foolish to have tried for peaceful transition, say in pre-revolutionary Russia or China or Cuba or Vietnam. It would be equally foolish to have tried for armed struggle in Italy, France, West Germany, Japan, UK or USA in the post-second world war period."

Consequently he concluded:

"Belief that the ballot box will eventually decide the fate of the revolution is wrong. So is to nurture any illusions that the ruling class will abdicate power on its own or by persuasion. Giving exclusive or priority attention to parliamentary activity over mass movements and struggles is wrong. Not to be prepared for any contingency and for rapid transition from one form of struggle to another can lead to damage.

The belief that no struggle is worth anything except armed struggle is, however, equally wrong. So is the belief that armed struggle is needed at all times and places and that armed civil war is the only possible form of revolution in any country."⁴⁶

Interestingly, both the Communist Parties followed the same line of criticism. They were emphasizing the lack of preparation on the part of the masses and the inadequacy of the present situation for radical action. They debunked the Maoist outfits for their imprudent adventurism and reckless violence but could not declare their revolutionary objective as illegitimate. Rather they tried to prove the legitimacy of their electoral functions as transitional means to prepare for a revolution. Thus the Naxalite experiment not only added a new dimension to the political life of post-colonial West Bengal but it also revealed some of the inner complexities of the communist movement in the state. The two main wings of communism that had participated in electoral politics had been compelled to do so.

⁴⁶ Sen Mohit: *CPI's Battle against Maoism and the Naxalites*, Communist Party Publication, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 37-38

In a situation which did not seem to permit revolution immediately unrestrained militancy would only produce the wrath of the ruling class and the 'revisionist' communists could have to face the same holocaust which had silenced the Naxalite outburst. To avoid this debacle but at the same time to make their presence felt in the politics of the state these communist factions pursued for limited power through election. But too much concern about electoral praxis might have ostracized them from the tradition of revolutionary politics. The Naxalite movement, however adventurist, could concretize this fear of ostracization for those wings adopting electoral means. That the fear was not baseless was proved by some of the contemporary reports in newspapers. *Hindustan Standard*, for example, reflected on some responses that came from within the party to the extremist developments:

"CPI(M) circles are currently engaged in a keen debate whether or not the post-UF situation both in Kerala and West Bengal warrants a thorough change in the party's political strategy and programme and in the top leadership as well.

The hawks or the hardliners in the party are believed to be actively pleading for injecting into the party's policy and programme unadulterated militancy under the leadership of the noted hardliner, Mr. B. T. Ranadive.

They firmly believe that the party can hold its own against the challenge of the CPI (ML) and the CPI only following the line it had adopted in the forties under the leadership of Mr. Ranadive.

The advocates of this line in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa are understood to have completed their exchange of views and have come to the conclusion that only a tough line can boost the sagging morale of the cadre and save the image of the party.

In their opinion the doves or the soft-liners like Mr. Basu and Mr. Namboodiripad should immediately be removed from leadership and the party's policy should cease to swing between quasi-parliamentary and quasi-

revolutionary strategies, for, they hold, this has completely frustrated the rank and file, many of whom are looking elsewhere for ideological inspiration.”⁴⁷

Though the official lines of the constitutional wings of the Communist Party condemned the CPI(ML) for practising rampant violence, some circles within those parties got tired of constitutionalism and were urging for militancy. Hence even in making official statements the constitutional Communist Parties had to remain cautious. A newspaper report commented:

“Three Left Communist leaders – Mr. P. Sundarayya, Mr. B. T. Ranadive and Mr. Promode Dasgupta are reported to have decided to modify their stand towards party extremists known as the “Naxalbari Group”.... They have agreed on three points: no public criticism of China, no reprimand of the Naxalbari group and the launching of a campaign against Mr. Ajoy Mukherjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal.

It is stated that they had to moderate their stand due to pressure from the rank and file in the party. The Left Communist Party has a membership of about 23000 in West Bengal. Among them about 5000 belong to the Naxalbari group.”⁴⁸

In another contemporary report in a newspaper with an avowedly anti-naxalite tone it was noted that

“The recent spate of Naxalite activities in Calcutta has evoked varied reactions among Leftists circles here. Curiously enough, most of the Leftists parties are reluctant to go too far in condemning the Naxalites.”

In other words, though challenged and victimized by the Naxalites, the constitutional Communist Parties could not disown them. They could speak of the incorrectness of the Naxalite tactics but any attempt to brand the Naxalites as fallen

⁴⁷ Hindustan Standard, May 7, 1970

⁴⁸ Ibid. August 1, 1967

elements might raise questions about their own right to belong to a house of radical ideology. The communists, therefore, resorted to a tactful political interpretation to save themselves and their images. On the one hand, they made the Congress misrule responsible for the rise of this overt radicalism. Consequently, they criticized the Congress Government's indifference to this political aspect of radicalism and its treatment of the radicals as hooligans as impractical. On the other hand, they tried to prove the soundness of the programme of their own vis-à-vis the militant actions of the Naxalites that would produce only anarchy. The same report continued:

"The CPI(M) which till recently was one of the main targets of Naxalite attack seems now to enjoy the awkward situation in which the Centre is finding itself in its failure to tackle the Naxalite menace.

A CPI(M) spokesman said here that the law and order situation in West Bengal was far better during the U.F. regime than it was now, primarily because the CPI(M) had sought to isolate the Naxalites politically, while the State Government today was trying to suppress them by force. This, according to him, was only encouraging the Naxalites to resort to force.

Although the spokesman condemned the Naxalites as "adventurists" and doing more harm than good to the cause of the revolution, he felt that the "ballyhoo" raised by the Centre over their activities in Calcutta, might be a ruse to prepare grounds for unleashing repression over all Leftist movements."

Though the impact of the Naxalite menace was more directly felt by the CPI(M), from whose party the Naxalites defected, the CPI too could not remain silent. It also played the same political game of looking to the Naxalites as sincere but misguided lot and making the other political parties responsible for unleashing these forces of chaos. The newspaper's report also made a comment on the CPI's reaction:

"The CPI seems to be sympathetically inclined towards the Naxalite youths because of their "sincerity". Although the party does not approve of their violent activities, they are tempted roundly to blame the CPI(M) for the present trend of extremism among a section of the youth. According to a CPI spokesman, the CPI(M) leaders, after the split of the party struck to a militant note and succeeded in misguiding the rank and file. Some sincere elements among the latter, taking their words at the face value had now resorted to violence."⁴⁹

The report also recorded the claim of the leftist parties to undermine the political base of the Naxalites. The CPI, the CPI(M) along with their partners in leftist politics like the Forward Bloc apparently had launched a successful operation of forcible occupation of land. This already tuned the peasant politics to a militant direction. The shift of the Naxalites from rural areas to urban centres was considered as a result of their failure to gain ground in the countryside where the leadership of the so-called constitutional wings of the communists, it was claimed, had already been firmly established.

Thus the Naxalite outburst created a new field of action for the constitutional leftism. Of course, it was a severe spell of crisis for the constitutional leftists. They were put into a trial since their ideology was questioned. But this was also a time when the constitutional leftism would prove the viability of its own. This was the time to prove that neither the autocratic, corrupt Congress government nor the adventurist, anarchic Naxalite regime but the balanced formula of electoral praxis and revolutionary ambition, which the leftists had evolved could ensure the nation's sustainability amidst a situation of crisis and underdevelopment.

⁴⁹ *The Statesman*, May 1, 1970

Even the Congress government too could not altogether ignore the ideological content of the Naxalite movement. For example, in a resolution adopted by the working committee of a Congress faction (Congress-O) the Naxalite menace was said to have a well-calculated political design behind it. The Congress was particularly worried about the Naxalite campaign for desecration of the portraits and statues of Gandhiji and other national leaders. It was suspected to be an attempt to wipe out the memory of the national leaders so that the communist philosophy would flourish unchecked. Naturally such a political design would be frustrated only by a political battle. Hence the Congress instructed its members to combat the negative campaigns of the Naxalites by the ideology of Gandhi himself. It said that the Naxalite movement through violence, murder, and destruction of private and public property aimed at eradicating all sorts of exploitation in the country. But it argued that Gandhiji's thoughts would find ample scope for the revolutionary ardour and passion for a just society minus the devastating spirit.⁵⁰ The Government of West Bengal too, while activating the full mechanism of repression, still appreciated the gravity of challenge. So, when the Union Government tried to strengthen the repressive hand of the State Government by applying such laws like the Preventive Detention (PD) Act, the latter could not but point out the inadequacy of mere physical force to tackle the situation. During the visit of the Union Home Secretary, L. P. Singh, in Calcutta the State Government made it clear that any measure to restore law and order in the state should be inseparably connected with the prompt

⁵⁰ Hindustan Standard, May 24, 1970

implementation of land reform measures, the revival of economic activity and a steady industrial growth. Police measures alone would not curb anti-social activities and restore healthy life unless the sense of frustration among the young people was overcome.⁵¹

Radicals in the Mirror of Populism

The task of the leftists became easier due to the internal tension of the Naxalite movement. Popular response to the Naxalites was not unequivocally supportive. Pro-naxalite journal *Frontier* which emphatically pointed out the emotional appeal of the Naxalites for the young and the destitute also noted the contradictory reaction of the people to this militant experiment. The letters to the editor of the journal from two commoners can be juxtaposed to read variety of popular opinions that the movement generated. The letters are the following:

i) "As a resident of Birbhum district and an observer of the upsurge of Naxalite activities from close quarters, I think the two reports fail to highlight the mass popularity the CPI(ML) is enjoying. One can understand why supporters of other parties talk and write bitterly about the CPI (ML); none of them are known to be able to initiate in this district any activities whatsoever. Newspapers talk of the scare among the general public, but ask many ricksaw-puller or coolie about the Naxalites and they are likely to tell you, "They are the poorman's party. They risk their lives for our sake."

...Such stories as the CPI (ML) extracting money from the rich people and protecting them in return will not be generally believed by the man in the street in the district. This practice is indulged in by supporters of all other parties in many other parts of West Bengal but the Naxalites are known, at least in Birbhum, for their purism.

⁵¹ *The Statesman*, May 11, 1970

...A significant feature of the 'Red Army' actions...is the class composition of the units. These are usually composed of 10 to 20 people, among whom the organizing cadres of middle class origin do not exceed 2 or 3. The rest are mainly of landless peasant origin.

...Yet another feature of these actions is that the annihilations are done after a trial conducted in public. In many cases, after the trial some were let off with humiliations, while the death sentence was pronounced against others. The raiders may come from outside, but very often the trials have been witnessed by hundreds of villagers who at least passively participated in the trial.

These penal actions of the 'Red Army' are often accompanied by confiscation and distribution of property. The mode of distribution is left to the discretion of a committee of local landless peasants."⁵²

ii) "Thanks are due to the correspondent who has given a detailed report on Naxalite activities in Birbhum (June 26, 1971). But unfortunately he has failed (willingly/unwillingly) to present these activities in their totality and their implications. It is untrue that these activities cover the whole of Birbhum district. They were mainly limited to Suri, Bolpur, Surul, Ilambazar and Rampurhat areas.

The 'growing support' for the Naxalites mainly comes from the students. The CPI(ML) group is still isolated from its natural ally, the peasantry who cannot even understand main purpose behind the activities of the Naxalites. I talked with some of the peasants near Bolpur and they were afraid of three things: the police, dacoits and the Naxalites.

Because of this isolation misunderstanding was growing about the Naxalites."⁵³

The sympathetic tone of the first letter signifies that the Naxalites brought into focus some of the basic questions, raised by the leftist politics in the state, with greater intensity. The

⁵² *Frontier*: letter from a reader at Suri, Birbhum, July 24, 1971

⁵³ *Frontier*: letter from a common man at Santiniketan, July 24, 1971

second letter which was not so optimistic, on the other hand, spoke of the organizational weakness of this extremist experiment that remained grossly misunderstood and failed to reach the different categories of people. This fragmented picture of Birbhum would be easily generalized for the entire state. The popular response to the Naxalite experiment swayed between reliance and suspicion, appreciation and scare. The poor people, urban and rural, could unmistakably identify their interests with the agenda of the Naxalites. Even the privileged and the middle classes sometimes sympathized with their activities, as another common man's letter mentioned that they were 'making a dangerous journey to achieve something'.⁵⁴ But at the same time, disgust with militancy, misinterpretation of overenthusiastic slogans clouded the popular perception of the Naxalite ideology and action, as the experience of a police officer in early '70s would prove:

"I was then posted in Birbhum. On one evening I was traveling in my jeep. In the long journey I hardly met any person or a vehicle. The road had a deserted look. This was, however, a common sight. The fright of the Naxalite onslaught paralyzed the normal life of the locality after sunset. Suddenly I found a ricksaw to be coming. A middle-aged man was sitting on it. He was desperately trying to draw my attention and halt my jeep. When I came closer he elaborated that he was a small businessman and for his occupational purpose very often he had to visit different parts of the district. On that day also, after his day's work being over, he was going back home. But it was too late. At evening he did not get any car or bus, and had no other option but to hire a ricksaw. But he was not feeling safe at all to make such a long journey by a ricksaw. Hence finding a police jeep he made an earnest appeal to take him home. When he reached his residence the wailing of his relatives hit upon my ears. Since he delayed so much, his

⁵⁴ A man of Santiniketan, writing a letter to *Frontier*, August 7, 1971

relatives apprehended great danger. But when they found him absolutely safe and unaffected, they all and he himself too considered it as my grace to save him from an ill fate. Their gratitude knew no bound.

The story did not end here. After a few days he came to my office. From then he visited me frequently. Even after my transfer to Calcutta the practice continued. During all of his visits he paid gratitude to me for saving his life. Each time I told him that there was hardly any question of saving his life because his life was not endangered. No one even blackmailed him. But his firm belief did not show any sign of crack. Nevertheless, this proves that terror and violence made a panic-stricken situation everywhere.”⁵⁵

In addition, two letters written by the party supremo Charu Mazumdar to one of his comrades in a gap of one month too were revealing of the complexities of the popular responses. The first letter was written in an elated mood at the growing mass participation, at the wide coverage of the newspapers of the new spirit, and at the apprehension of the government about popular militancy. But the tone of jubilation was no longer there in the second one. A strong counter-offensive by the government had marred the first wave of popular radicalism and the party’s supreme commander was labouring to restore the moral strength of his cadres. Dire optimism to sustain the revolutionary zeal of the masses was still there. But the anxiety about the vacillation of popular minds could not be concealed. The two letters are the following:

i) “Dear comrade,

Your letters come to hand. All reports are encouraging. Yesterday at Chaterhat *jotedars* launched a raid on the peasants with eight guns and fired thirteen rounds. The peasants took cover and shot arrows. One on the other side was struck but none of us was injured. So I can say without any doubt that the struggle in our area has entered on a new stage.

⁵⁵ Interview with Amiya Samanta, January, 2005

Today's newspaper has reported that a Parliamentary Delegation would come here. Evidently the provincial Government and the Central Government have become very nervous. Today's paper also reports that in ... Your struggle has taken a qualitative leap. But a quantitative development is also required now. The peasant comrades have to carry on a steadfast political campaign. Only then we shall be able to take another qualitative leap. ... The politics in which you have initiated the peasant cannot be forgotten. As bits of straw are caught at in a storm so they are contemplating to avoid danger by obtaining bail or surrender. This contemplation on their part is nothing surprising for they find that many have come out on bail and are moving freely. What they do not find is that the Govt is granting this bail only to create illusion. If the peasants go on surrendering under this illusion this will not only harm the struggle but will put all weapons in the enemy's hands to punish with long terms those who step into the trap. Thus the enemy will be able to render those cadres inept for life. But if they do not surrender and if you can endure, the Govt will have no incentive in detaining those arrested. When the boys will come out of jail the entire struggle will be permeated with more new blood. Put these discussions before the peasants.... This is the strategy of today. Comrades, a true Communist is made out of this uncertainty, this trek through perils. You are faced with that ordeal and you will be able to surmount it." (17.07.67)⁵⁶

On the basis of these common men's experiences and responses a journalistic assessment of Naxalism was made in the *Frontier*. The report identified some 'deadly errors' in the movement:

i) The movement was said to have depended on middle class leadership. Referring to the various historical experiences the article agreed that in any successful revolution the world had hitherto known the first group of revolutionaries necessarily came from the middle class. Therefore, nobody could blame

⁵⁶ The letters are taken from Samanta Amiya: *Left Extremist Movement in West Bengal*, Kolkata, 1984, P. 270-272 (Letter No 1), P. 291-294 (Letter No 2)

the Naxalites for their class origins. But the author of the article pertinently reminded that the real revolutionaries by themselves did constitute a class of socially awakened proletarians. The middle class people living in towns enjoyed a kind of parasitic existence on the production base of the villages. Therefore, it was absolutely essential and urgent for the cadres of the middle class or urban origin to develop a set of revolutionaries, both leaders and general ranks, in the villages from amongst the most exploited sections of the village community, tied to the rural production base. Precisely over this task the CPI(ML) activists were alleged not to have made an all-out effort.

ii) The middle class which was the social base of the Naxalites and which the Naxalites wanted to exert a stern revolutionary attitude and self-sacrifice too was reported not to have been psychologically or circumstantially prepared to do so. Of course, the intensity of the socio-economic crisis was acute amongst the middle class population and the discontent against it, both in urban and rural areas, was phenomenal. Yet, the report argued that the Naxalites, themselves having middle class background, overestimated the capacity of the frustrated middle class for creating the forces of revolutionary consolidation. Middle class youths who were indiscriminately recruited to enumerate party ranks were alleged not to have discarded petty-bourgeois mentality. Though there was no lack of revolutionary zeal among these youths, revolutionary outlook as well as the qualities of wisdom and tenacity, which were essential to sustain the revolutionary zeal, were often said to be in want of.

iii) While the middle class failed to reach the revolutionary standard the Naxalites expected them to reach, the Naxalite movement itself too was said to have been 'blown off its chartered

track by the gusty wind of amoral middle class discontents'. Issues like school-burning, statue-breaking, annihilation of class enemies seemed to have caused this alienation. These acts, the analyst admitted that, might contain elements of a revolutionary moral, a challenge to a rotten system. But he also rightly pointed out that such acts did not by themselves ensure revolutionary consolidation of middle class youths. On the contrary, the middle class as a whole reacted unfavourably against its own youth. The need for neutralizing the middle class vis-à-vis the Naxalites was seriously impaired by these acts of school-burning or statue-breaking or annihilation programme of the petty-bourgeois revolutionary youths.⁵⁷

No wonder, while launching their counter-offensive the police utilized this popular panic and abhorrence to create an anti-naxalite public sphere vis-à-vis the popular support base of the Naxalites. Amiya Samanta spoke of his network of action:

"When I was posted in Birbhum in the early '70s the military force was controlling the district. But I requested my higher authority to withdraw the army, because I believed that the army was not the right agency to deal with a popular movement. The information about the Naxalites could be collected from the local people. The Naxalites claimed that they were so closely allied to the masses as to become, in the Maoist term, 'fish in water'. My strategy was to make this water polluted so that they would not live there. I highlighted the cruelties of the Naxalite actions and thus created an anti-naxalite opinion among the people. The result was the people, on the one hand, gave us information about the Naxalites, and, on the other, guarded the localities to provide active assistance to the police in combating the Naxalites."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Basu Prabir: Lessons of Birbhum, *Frontier*, December 18, 1971

⁵⁸ Interview

Of course, the pro-naxalite popular faction made out its own case against such police actions. Prabir Basu reported on Birbhum:

"There are resistance groups (*Pratirodh Bahini* is the popular name) organised by the district administration. The sub-divisional police officers have recently held meetings in all the 'troubled areas' in collaboration with the local rogues, and apolitical or political *mastan* (ruffians). During the whole of August and September these officers conducted raids, tortures and indiscriminate arrests in their areas in order to force people to make a choice in favour of the police against the Naxalites. Panic among the people was at that time so high that no one could stay at home at night, no young man could think of not being implicated in case of arson and murder to be instituted by the police, no middle-aged man could avoid severe beating up in course of interrogatives in a police lock-up. A young man, Bhudar Dalui of Bhubandanga under Bolpur P.S. who had to vomit blood as a result of police beating and had returned from the door of death by sheer luck, is now a captain of eight resistance groups consisting of mostly poor shopkeepers, apolitical students, some Congress(R) people, some day labourers, poorest employees of governmental or semi-governmental establishments and local roughs and bullies. Local big traders, renowned blackmarketers, Government contractors and some upper middle class guys having no ostensible sources of their high income bear the burden of financing the resistance groups' daily performance. There is one 'General' in a police station, and all the area 'captains' work under his direction. ...Particularly in middle class areas a few such so-called 'extremists' are now working with vigour for resistance activities...."⁵⁹

The police officers who were assigned with the responsibility to secure the state from the radical invasion also identified some serious organizational and strategic limitations of the Naxalite movement. Arun Prosad Mukherjee who dealt with the initial outburst of the CPI(M) extremists in Naxalbari-

⁵⁹ Basu Prabir: Lessons of Birbhum, *Frontier*, December 18, 1971

Khoribari-Phansidewa police station areas of Siliguri sub-division in Darjeeling district in 1967 found some serious flaws in their strategic and tactical lines. Geographically, Siliguri sub-division having a long border line with then East Pakistan and many places covered with thick forests provided some easy hide-outs to the extremists. But this, according to Arun Prosad Mukherjee, "gave a false sense of security to the extremist leadership who wrongly presumed that these were good enough for building up their safe sanctuaries or 'liberated zones' against the possible attack of the security forces. They did not realize that the above topographical and geographical advantages were more apparent than real and that properly planned and executed police operations could flush them out without much trouble."

And this actually happened when within two months after the launching of police operations nearly all the top ranking leaders including Kanu Sanyal, Muzibur Rahman, Oli Mohammad, Jangal Santhal, Babulal Bishwakarmakar, Kamaksha Banerjee, along with a number of activists either surrendered or fled by about mid-August 1967. Mukherjee further argued:

"The bulk of the cadres of the movement had some alternative means of livelihood either as permanent or contract labourers of the tea gardens in the area or had some land holdings, howsoever small. As such, it was wrong to jump to the conclusion, as Charubabu did, that these persons were 'excellent materials for the revolutionary purpose'. We felt that such elements could not be expected to go in for a 'protracted struggle' as propounded under Maoist principles."

In a few meetings with Kanu Sanyal, Souren Basu and Charu Mazumdar he claimed to have pointed out these strategic and tactical flaws of the movement and requested these leaders to follow an alternative course of action avoiding bloodshed and mindless confrontation. But the attempt went in vain as extremism continued unabated and the police operations followed subsequently.

Arun Prosad Mukherjee also found some falsehood and exaggeration in the party documents. In the annual commemoration of the Naxalbari upsurge Charu Mazumdar pointing out the uniqueness of this experiment commented:

“This is the first time that the peasants have struggled not only for their political demands but for the seizure of state power. If the Naxalbari peasant struggle has any lesson for us, it is this: militant struggles must be carried on not for land, crops, etc. but for the seizure of state power. It is precisely this that gives the Naxalbari struggle its uniqueness.”⁶⁰

But Mukherjee found the spirit of the document as a subsequent construction and, therefore, not reflective of what happened and what was aimed at Naxalbari. He elaborated that:

“Charu Mazumdar’s subsequent claims during 1968-69 that the Naxalbari struggle was for capture of political/state power, as made out in the ‘Terai Report of Kanu Sanyal’ (actually written by Charubabu himself as transpired later), was far from true. The movement was basically a revolt against (a) non-implementation of any land reform measures as provided for even in the WB Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 for distribution of vested lands to the landless and marginal farmers, (b) eviction of bargadars (share-croppers) and (c) exploitation and oppression of the land-owners and tea garden proprietors.”

Despite appreciating the justness of those demands, Mukherjee, however, felt that these “could be largely fulfilled, even without any recourse to the path of violence and bloodshed.” He was particularly hopeful because important ministers and leaders of the UF government like Harekrishna Konar (of CPM and Land & Land Revenue Minister) and Bishwanath Mukherjee (of CPI and Irrigation Minister), Jyoti Basu (of CPM and Deputy Chief

⁶⁰ Mazumdar Charu: One Year of Naxalbari Struggle, *Liberation* Vol-1, No-8, June 1968

Minister) and other ministers like Nani Bhattacharya (of RSP) and Amar Chakraborty (of FB) were all supportive of urgent remedial measures.⁶¹

This tendency of exaggeration and sometimes distortion that Mazumdar and some of his close associates were given to was noted by the party activists themselves. Dilip Bagchi remembered one such incident:

“Charuda had a natural tendency to suspect and disbelieve everyone. He encircled himself with a group of ‘loyal’ supporters and completely relied on their opinions. Souren Basu, Kanu Sanyal, Dipak Biswas, Pabitrarani Saha and a few others belonged to that category. When I was imprisoned at Siliguri Special Jail with Comrade Jangal Santal, he regretted that on many occasions the success story of the struggles and actions had been largely exaggerated. He was also anxious about the fact that the plans of future actions on the basis of such ridiculous half-truths might plunge the party into greater danger. This exaggeration which misled Charuda was the fabrication of his loyal commandants. Nowadays, it has become customary to singularly blame Charuda for the failure of the revolutionary struggle of the Naxalites. But his close followers who surrounded him cannot evade their responsibility too. When Charuda heard of any news of the successful implementation of his ideas he rejoiced like a child and soon became engaged in chalking out the next plan of action. He had a magical power to inflame others by his own conviction and dream, however illusive they might be.”⁶²

Amiya Samanta who appreciated the Naxalite demands as justified too found their approach irrational and methods unworkable:

“As I talked to various Naxalite leaders and cadres, I found no viability in their propaganda for land-grabbing. It was an illusion that the assassination or expulsion of the zamindars and jotedars would automatically transfer the

⁶¹ Interview, January 2005

⁶² Bagchi Dilip: *Naoda Theke Naxalbari: Pichan Phire Dekha* (From Naoda to Naxalbari in Hindsight) Mondal Pulakesh & Mitra Jaya ed.: *Sei Dashak*, pp. 44-45

ownership of land to the tillers. The ownership of each plot of land is registered and the copies of its documents are preserved in the Government office of land records. So, it was not easy to destroy those documents. The Naxalites followed the Chinese model of 'Red Base Area'. By raising guerrilla warfare and annihilating the class enemies they wanted to create liberated zones. But this strategy, though congenial for the decentralized political system in China, was not feasible in our centralized administration modeled upon the British structure. In our system even the remotest zone too is not outside the police control. Even if the administration of a particular area becomes disrupted by the extremist attack, it is possible to recover the political authority within a short time by sending special force. The Naxalites did not have the strength to combat this huge police and military force."⁶³

A Heap of Broken Dreams: The Movement Ends 'not with a bang but in whimper'

The Naxalite movement was torn from within by the dissension of its members and factions. In May 1970 the Party Congress of the CPI (ML) was held in Garden Reach in utmost secrecy.⁶⁴ In this Congress Mazumdar's leadership was openly questioned. Close comrades of Charu Mazumdar like Sushital Raychaudhuri, Asim Chatterjee from time to time raised dissenting voices against several points of Mazumdar's programme as well as of ideology.

The breaking of statues and the killing of class enemies was one such issue. The critics were not against those programmes but criticized the excess involved in them. Sushital Raychaudhuri, for example, made a distinction between the political leaders and the non-political intellectuals. Within the first category he accused the Gandhians as well as the revisionist

⁶³ Interview, January 2005

⁶⁴ Hindustan Standard, May 7, 1970

Marxists for diverting the people from communism and breeding a bourgeois culture. But he did not find the thought of men like Rammohan Ray, Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore, who contributed to the Indian renaissance, as detrimental to the spread of the communist ideology. Hence he identified the former as the enemies but spared the latter and outlined the programme accordingly:

“Who appear to be the main enemies to our programme of mobilizing the peasants, workers and the common masses for armed agrarian revolution? Who are posing the greatest constraint to the way of imparting the Maoist lesson to these people? They were either the representatives of the Gandhian culture like the Congress and its brethren – the Bangla Congress or the revisionist groups like the CPI-CPI(M) and the other leftist parties. So, we must expose and make a continuous propaganda against this network of alliance of feudal and imperial powers with the Gandhian culture. We should also open a relentless struggle against the reformist deviation of the Marxist tradition and its subordination to the Gandhian culture in its ideas and practice. But if we make a factual analysis of our past experience we must admit that we did not need to open an ideological struggle against Rammohun, Vidyasagar or Rabindranath, or curtail their influence to induce the peasant masses into revolutionary actions at Naxalbari or Medinipur. It is a wrong step to rule out all aspects of bourgeois nationalism indiscriminately. Could not we create those struggles without breaking statues or destroying educational institutions? So, when Comrade Mazumdar sets the image breaking as an essential pre-condition to revolutionary struggle, he actually makes an oversimplification of his responsibility of combating bourgeois nationalism.”⁶⁵

But Mazumdar did not endorse this view because he saw this division between the bourgeois politicians and the bourgeois intellectuals as unnatural. Both of them, according to him, were

⁶⁵ Inner Party Documents: Students and Youth Movement - written by Purna (Pen-name of Sushital Raychaudhuri) and Charu Mazumdar
Ebn Jalarka: Ananya Sushital (Sushital Raychaudhuri Sankhya, (Unique Sushital: A Sushital Raychaudhuri Issue of Jalarka) Kolkata, 1999), pp. 32-33

compradors and could not think in terms of the end of imperialism. Stigmatizing both of the categories as class enemies, he wrote:

“On the issue of image breaking, he has no objection to the breaking of the statues of Gandhi and the Congress leaders. But he is protesting when our struggle is going against Rammohun, Vidyasagar or Rabindranath. His idea is that these bourgeois intellectuals were the philosophers of the bourgeois democratic revolution in our country. So, instead of indiscriminate iconoclasm, he suggests to be selective. But it is necessary to judge whether these intellectuals at all imbibed the spirit of the democratic revolution. In colonial India the primary characteristic of a bourgeois democracy should have been its struggle for achieving independence. But did those persons who have been identified by Comrade Purna as the ideologues of the bourgeois democratic revolution ever attempt to make their country free of British control? They did not lend their support to the country’s first struggle for independence in 1857. On the contrary, they opposed it. Their reformist movement was intended to divert the common people from anti-colonial struggle and objective. Within a few months after the party Congress in which we took a unanimous decision to identify the Indian bourgeoisie as a comprador class from the beginning, Comrade Purna has expressed his difference of opinion.”⁶⁶

A party pamphlet formulated Mazumdar’s ideas in more concrete terms:

“The ruling class is shamelessly displaying and propagating the quotable quotes of the great men of our country on walls, trams, buses, journals and in radios, cinemas. Obviously, these were intended to disgrace the CPI(ML) and its revolutionary ideology before the public. So, we too in our turn had no other option but to rouse abhorrence about those men through our ideology of class. Those national leaders, whose images are being broken by our revolutionary students and youths, were great personalities, and contributed to the progress of Indian culture and civilization. But they were all protecting the interests of the foreign powers. But the time has not yet come to assess one’s personality by ignoring his class position.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid. pp 37-38

⁶⁷ Collected from Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*, pp. 145-146

Raychaudhuri also pointed out the lack of a revolutionary programme in Mazumdar's strategy. In a long letter written to the party's High command he highlighted the following drawbacks:

a) Mazumdar was alleged to have made a narrow interpretation of the party programme as well as a deviation from the Maoist principle regarding his policy about the rich peasant. Instead of incessant struggle against them as sworn enemies Raychaudhuri favoured the idea of opening occasional and calculated alliances with them. Nor did he approve Mazumdar's method of struggle which, according to him, was reduced to merely a policy of annihilation. Hence he condemned Mazumdar for indulging in leftist adventurism.

b) Raychaudhuri criticized the principle of treating the rural and urban fronts in equal term. He rather argued that the prolonged and uneven nature of the revolutionary process had a differential impact upon the villages and the cities and, therefore, no uniform pattern of action was feasible in two fronts.

c) Raychaudhuri also detected some faults in the cadre training programme of the party. He found no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the young members of the party, who often at their own initiative went to villages to gather experiences about rural life. Such ventures often ended in discomfiture and frustration because due to total ignorance of rural life most of those urban youths failed to adapt to the rural milieu. But Raychaudhuri blamed the leadership for not imparting the political and social training to those enthusiastic urban youths to utilize this energy for rural mobilization.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ebn Jalarka: Ananya Sushital (Sushital Raychaudhuri Sankhya 2, 1998)

In other words, according to Raychaudhuri, the armed 'actions', in the absence of a full-fledged revolutionary programme, were bound to be isolated cases of violence. These could, on the one hand, weaken the party's ideological basis and, on the other hand, alienate the party from the masses.

On this point of growing distance from the masses Mazumdar was severely criticized by Asim Chatterjee, the most prominent student leader of the movement. He enthusiastically implemented Mazumdar's programme of annihilation of class enemies. But he did not like to concentrate in urban areas alone. He was even more eager to form guerrilla squads for action and a base area in the countryside. Nor did he support Mazumdar's idea of forming guerrilla squads for action in utmost secrecy. Rather his idea was to carry on secret propaganda among the masses and organize group meetings, to recruit a people's army from the volunteers of the poor and the landless peasants, and consequently to create a base area in countryside. Thus, as he expected that, these guerrilla squads would be secret to the enemies but open to the people. Without this popular base, according to Chatterjee, each incident of annihilation, instead of promoting class struggle, would be a futile burden. Mazumdar agreed with Chatterjee on the point that to make agrarian revolution successful the leadership of the poor and landless peasants needed to be established. In the matter of selection of commanders at every level emphasis would have to be laid on poor and landless peasants because the class struggle in rural areas was their struggle. But Mazumdar argued that the people's liberation army could not be formed by merely giving a call for it and base areas could not be developed by merely giving a call for developing them. A permanent army and a politically

conscious people, according to him, were essential preconditions to build a base area. It was only after the two conditions were fulfilled that the question of selecting the terrain for base area could arise.

On this terrain issue also Mazumdar differed from Chatterjee. Mazumdar's opinion was that the mountainous region could provide a natural shelter to the revolutionary army. But the danger of taking shelter in the mountains lay in the possibility of becoming isolated from the broad masses. There was also the possibility of being encircled by the enemies' forces. Mazumdar, therefore, preferred to build a base area in the plains. Even if base areas were created in mountains, Mazumdar advised the party to send armed forces to the plains. They would, on the one hand, make people politically conscious through regular propaganda. On the other hand, they would help the party to cause disarray among the enemies through guerrilla tactics. But such a programme, according to Mazumdar, could be implemented only when people were alert and the leaders were prepared. Without this preparation, Mazumdar warned that the shift of the locus of guerrilla action from urban areas to countryside that had been contemplated by Chatterjee would be meaningless and even dangerous.⁶⁹

In hindsight too Asim Chatterjee lamented the lack of a constructive programme:

"Actually a romantic notion of armed struggle pushed the student and youth to terrorism. The failure to mobilize armed revolution as a logical culmination of class struggle led them to pursue terrorist activities, despite their theoretical adherence to socialism. But the four hundred years' history

⁶⁹ Mazumdar Charu: On the Questions of Building People's Army and Base Areas, Liberation, July 1971-January 1972

of terrorism shows that it produces nothing more than fiery speeches, valourous actions and a group of undaunted heroes. But the vision of an alternative social order based on a reasonable understanding of the social evolution cannot come out of all these elements. The social terrorism of the Naxalites too brought nothing else to the students and the youth.”⁷⁰

He admitted that the rejection of tradition without the idea of a viable alternative marked their venture with an apocalyptic spirit:

“Iconoclasm was another widely discussed issue. In the youth psyche of the period the statues of the national leaders were symbols of a system after removing which the installation of appropriate images was necessary. In evaluating a historical personality their only criterion was to assess his role in the agrarian movement and armed struggle. This unidimensional approach resulted in oversimplification. In a multi-dimensional life and society a person cannot be assessed so mechanically but should be judged in terms of his role in totality in the context of his times. The young students avoided such delicate but essential analysis. Hence their entire action was marked by infantilism. They failed to understand that by breaking the statue of a person it was not possible to wipe out his place in people’s memory. What we needed was a long-standing ideological struggle to diminish his influence on popular minds. If by that ideological standard any statue was identified as unnecessary or pretentious it would be rejected. But an abrupt venture of destruction without undertaking a prolonged ideological preparation would appear as an imposition on the people, who instead of swallowing it would reject the destructionists. This was exactly what happened to the Naxalites.

...In the same way, the demand for a new educational system took the form of destruction of the schools and colleges. But those inexperienced and immature young activists did not appreciate the fact that the new form of knowledge would emanate from the older one and only the experience of the bourgeois education might lead to its rejection in favour of the socialist

⁷⁰ Chattopadhyay Asim: *Saht Dashaker Yuba-Chhatra Andolon*, p. 22

model of education. While urging for the 'destruction of the bourgeois education', they forgot that the lack of education would only give birth to lack of political training, fact would give way to fiction, superstition would take the place of reason."⁷¹

In Asim Chatterjee's perception, the breaking of statues, the killing of a few persons and the demolition of some institutions all of which were supposed to be 'actions' to reject a particular 'tradition' or a 'class' failed to spread any revolutionary message. Rather they seemed to have terrorized people and distanced them from the party's way to 'revolution'.

The dissociation of the party from the masses was also a major point of criticism in the argument of Asit Sen, another dissident leader to form a Revolutionary Preparatory Committee. Asit Sen condemned Mazumdar for not creating a proletarian base of the party and following a short cut of organizing armed revolution by simply liquidating class enemies individually. Thus he shared the feeling of Asim Chatterjee and Sushital Raychaudhuri. As a remedial measure, however, Sen had a different kind of suggestion. Instead of pushing the urban cadres to village areas Asit Sen rather suggested building up base areas in the main cities. His argument was that the ultimate objective of the party being to smash the state machinery it would have to operate in the urban areas where the state machinery was concentrated. Hence, though the peasantry should constitute a part of the revolutionary masses, the vanguards of the revolution, according to his plan, should be recruited from the working class belts.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 23

⁷² Hindustan Standard, May 11, 1970

Souren Bose who was a close associate of Charu Mazumdar detected a major drawback in Charu Mazumdar's programme in its negligence to develop military skill of the cadres and build up a revolutionary army. He commented that Mazumdar's political acumen led him to assume correctly that the mercenary army would be easily demoralized by the revolutionary spirit of the guerrilla forces. But he could not appreciate the necessity of military training that could transform the ideological fervour into martial skill. As a result, according to Bose, Mazumdar's leadership, however conspicuous by its farsightedness and novelty of thought, became mechanical and impractical.⁷³

Extreme authoritarianism was another point of criticism. Men like Sushital Raychaudhuri were demanding the democratization of the party committees so that the freedom of discussion on any contested issue could be secured. Actually Sushital Raychaudhuri had prepared an inner party document, in which he raised questions about Mazumdar's line on several points. But this document had never been discussed in any of the party meetings. Rather Raychaudhuri was harshly treated by the Central Committee for the alleged deviation from the party line. Raychaudhuri resented at this attitude of the party. He was warning against the dangerous tendency in a section of the party of identifying the commands of the supreme leader with the party's ideology. The idea of infallibility of any leader, according to him, would ultimately lead to the growth of dictatorship and person cult and spoil the scientific spirit of socialism.⁷⁴

⁷³ Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*

⁷⁴ Ibid.

A major point of conflict was the Bangladesh War. The official CPI(ML) line condemned the war of Bangladesh as a 'sham liberation struggle'. It detected in it a counter-revolutionary attempt by the 'US imperialists', the 'Soviet social imperialists', the 'Indian expansionists' as well as 'the comprador bourgeoisie and the landlords' of East Pakistan to dismember Pakistan and convert East Pakistan into one more link in the chain of bases against Socialist China. Hence it criticized the Indian Government for participating in such a counter-revolutionary conspiracy and even sending armed infiltrators across the border to cause sabotage and harassment. On the other hand, it welcomed the effort of the Communist Party of East Pakistan to build a genuine people's liberation army and to set it to fight along class line. Certain units of the party led by men like Asim Chatterjee, however, were not satisfied at this modest statement. They contended that the entire imperialist camp and the Indian expansionists launched a war of aggression against Pakistan and the Yahya Khan Government was fighting a just war against them to protect national integrity. They also maintained that the Yahya Khan Government represented the anti-imperialist national bourgeoisie of Pakistan and, therefore, it should be supported in clear terms.

But Mazumdar replied that the Government of India had not yet declared war against Pakistan. What the Government of India was doing was that it carried on sabotage and interfered in the internal affairs of Pakistan. Therefore, it would not be proper at this stage to declare that Pakistan was waging a just war. However, its war against the sabotage and interference was certainly justifiable. Mazumdar also maintained his difference from Chatterjee's group in assessing the real nature of Yahya

Khan's government. He opined that Yahya Khan's coming to power was not the result of any bloody struggle waged by the national bourgeoisie. It was just a case of transfer of authority from Ayub Khan to Yahya Khan. He emphatically pointed out that it was Yahya's government which declared the Communist Party illegal. This Government tried to consolidate its power by relying on the landlord class. Its weapon was religious obscurantism. He also mentioned that, while Yahya Khan was fighting for his survival against the U.S. conspiracies, he was also sending his men to wait upon the U. S. imperialists. In other words, just as he found in Mujibar Rahaman's campaign a rallying point for the comprador bourgeoisie and the feudal landlords, he was equally suspicious of the reactionary nature of the Yahya Khan's Government. Hence, he had a reservation in supporting Yahya Khan even after the foreign aggression had started.

The Communist Party, according to Mazumdar, should rouse the peasant masses and build up its own army to fight the foreign aggression independently. It could give a call for unity with Yahya Khan. But even on occasions of unity the leadership and initiative must remain in the hands of the Communist Party. He strongly asserted that the Yahya Khans would be allowed to enter the union only when the Communist Party had succeeded in mobilizing the masses through its independent work. In the long run, therefore, according to his plan, the communists would have to open a twofold struggle: one against the foreign imperialism and the other against the reactionary domain of Yahya Khan. In other words, Mazumdar was warning the Communist Party not to forget its class identity even when it was fighting for a nationalist cause.

Mazumdar in this respect was trying to replicate the Chinese experience. In China, during the Japanese aggression in 1931 the Communist Party recruited a peasant militia. It played a far more important role than the government's military force in combating the foreign enemy. Later this people's army exposed the reactionary nature of the Kuomintang government and compelled it to compromise with the Communist Party. Thus the struggle for national liberation was fought along the line of class war.⁷⁵ During the Second World War and its aftermath, according to Mazumdar's analysis, the undivided Communist Party of India faced the most serious challenge on the issue of uniting the nationalist cause and the ideas of class war. But he counted it as a failure of the CPI of not tackling this delicate problem to promote the party's interests. Rather, he alleged that in the name of protecting the chastity of class struggle it left the field of the nationalist movement. As a result, he concluded that, instead of building a people's army from the nationalist cadres, the party lost acceptability to the people. In 1971, Charu Mazumdar found in the struggle for national liberation an excellent opportunity before the Communist Party of East Pakistan for radicalizing the mass movement, for converting a war-energized nation into an army of class struggle. Thus the Naxalite movement brought into focus some of the basic questions which perturbed the Communist Party in the sub-continent since its inception.

⁷⁵ i) Mazumdar Charu: Pakistan and the Role of the Communist Party

ii) Mazumdar Charu: Dawn of a New Era in East Pakistan *Liberation*, April-June 1971

However, the inner party differences became intensified. Asim Chatterjee had almost severed his connections with Mazumdar and formed a parallel party organization which was styled as the 'Regional Committee of the CPI(ML) for West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa'. He allied with Satya Narayan Singh who had been in charge of Bihar State Committee of the party and strongly criticized Mazumdar for pursuing 'a Trotskyite adventurist line with a view to destroying the party and revolution'.⁷⁶ Consequently in the Second Party Congress in Bihar the Central Committee took the decision to expel Charu Mazumdar and elect Satya Narayan Singh as the new General Secretary. The Central Committee also adopted a resolution calling upon the Indian people "to oppose a war between Pakistan and India and to support revolution". The new arrangement could not become effective because most of the leading members were arrested. Mazumdar's line, however, lost its acceptability.⁷⁷

While within the party Mazumdar was marginalized, the international mentor of the CPI(ML) too disapproved of Mazumdar's line. The Communist Party of China which had hailed the Naxalbari outburst as 'spring thunder over India' found many of the later developments confusing and even contradictory with the Maoist principle. Souren Bose who on behalf of Charu Mazumdar made a clandestine visit to China in

⁷⁶ Satya Narayan Singh made a report in the Second Party Congress, where he formulated charge against Charu Mazumdar. Collected from 'Expulsion of Charu Mazumdar Reported', *The Statesman*, November 11, 1971

⁷⁷ Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*

1971 noted the adverse reaction of the top ranking Chinese leaders like Chou-En-lai and Kang Sheng. The CPC criticized the policies of the CPI(ML) on the following points:

a) The CPC totally disapproved of the CPI(ML)'s slogans like 'China's Chairman is our Chairman'⁷⁸ Rather in no uncertain term it stated to the representative of the CPI(ML):

"The revolutions in different countries have different dimensions. So a fraternal party can only generate a sense of fraternity. But you cannot consider the two parties identical. ...If you regard the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao as the leader of your party, you will commit a serious mistake. Indeed, such a notion is totally contradictory to the Maoist view and was opposed by the Chairman."

b) The CPC also did not endorse the CPI(ML)'s interpretation of the trade union movement as merely defensive and economic, devoid of political spirit and objective. It would be unwise, according to the CPC, to deconsecrate the mass activities by valorizing action based politics.

c) The CPC also resented against the absence of a clear and full-fledged agrarian programme of the CPI(ML). It also emphasized that such a policy should not be formulated mechanically but in conformity with the popular expectations. Further, the policy would be revised according to the changing needs.

d) The CPC also warned against futile adventurism. Austerity, sacrifice, martyrdom, however glorious and venerating, should be judged not for their own sake but for their contribution to the cause of revolution.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ In March 1970 a few Naxalite students of Jadavpur University put up a poster of Mao-tse-Tung with the above-quoted caption in their campus. Soon it became a widely used slogan of the CPI(ML). (*Saroj Dutta Rachanasangraha, Tritiya Khanda*)

⁷⁹ Basu Souren: *Charu Majumdarer Katha*, pp. 162-170

Not only the leaders dissented and the international communist camp disapproved of the doctrinal legitimacy of the Naxalite movement but also there were many shadow lines of confusion within the spirited psyche of the Naxalite youth. Krishna Bandyopadhyay who joined the movement as a young college girl found neither enthusiasm nor dedication lacking among the activists. She remembered with great admiration the fiery imagination that captivated her and her comrades at that time:

“We had been overwhelmed by a dreamy spirit to make the year of ’75 the year of liberation. In the heart of our hearts we had a firm belief that in that year India would be liberated and all of our comrades who were suffering in jails, would be free. A number of young cadres sacrificed their lives for the fulfilment of that dream. Drona (Dronacharya Ghosh), like one of them, became a victim to the atrocious attack of the jail guards on the prisoners on February 7, 1972 he too cherished that dream. ...In his last letter he expressed the hope, ‘Emancipation can come in two ways. Either people will liberate us or we ourselves shall take the initiative. But whatever it would be, it must take place before ’75.’”⁸⁰

Nevertheless, at her mature age she could not avoid a critical self-appraisal:

“Our imagination was captured by a dream. But we never pondered over the strategy of making such a dream into reality or the viability of such an ambition vis-à-vis the gigantic mechanism of state power. Our leaders had injected into us a spirit which we spread among the peasants and the workers. The setting of a target year of liberation in 1975 was essentially a measure of self-motivation. Had we set before the masses a distant goal that could be achieved after a protracted and even century-long struggle,

⁸⁰ Bandyopadhyay Krishna : *Abirata Larai* (Continuous Struggle) *Khonj*, May 2001, pp. 93

perhaps we could not impress them or ensure their participation in such a struggle. Those starving, destitute people were actually captivated by the prospect of an immediate fulfilment of their dream. But, though we had the ambition, we could not evolve the right way of action.”⁸¹

The urge for a hasty solution flared up by a romantic imagination of revolution made the movement lacking in pragmatism, as Dipanjan Raychaudhuri felt:

“Our transformation from the cadres of student and youth movement to the leaders of mass movement was marked by a step-jumping. The evolutionary process of attainment of political maturity was disrupted by it. The activists of the student and youth movement needed a longer experience as participants in peasants and workers’ struggle. This would enrich their understanding of the popular psyche and strengthen their acumen to differentiate between an emotional outburst and a long-term aspiration. They would have been able to identify the digressions more easily and fight them.”⁸²

Another aspect of romanticism was to depute the immature and inexperienced young boys and girls of urban centres to villages. The idealism of getting identified with the village people without having any idea of the arduousness of rural life did not always produce the desired result. Dipanjan Raychaudhuri, a student of Presidency College and a product of the hub of Calcutta, narrated the experiences of such ventures:

“ ‘Go to village’. It sounded very romantic but reality was hard. The young boys and girls, born and brought up in the care and affection of the middle class families, used to visit remote poor villages with a cloth and a towel. As early as 1968 we got the instruction of Charu Mazumdar that we would have to live in the huts of poor and landless peasants, share their

⁸¹ Interview with Krishna Bandyopadhyay, January 2005

⁸² Raychaudhuri Dipanjan: *Chhatra Andolan O Presidency College*, p. 134

food and take part in the physical labour they performed. The only duty he conferred upon us was to motivate them in a struggle for capturing power from the exploitative landlords.

...Initially many of the activists left the village shelters. I myself ran away several times in nearby towns to enjoy the rhythm of urban life. Later, however, some of us adapted to village life and applied ourselves in mobilizing the people for future revolution. Those who failed and came back gradually recovered from the demoralizing effect and undertook new assignments in the growing militancy of politics. However, in retrospect, it seems that we expected too much from a group of young chaps having the experience of only two or three years of student politics. As a result, some of the promising activists who failed to adjust with the rural life and politics suffered from a sense of humiliation and despair. What was needed was a greater farsight to assign responsibilities to the activists according to their temperament and capability. Perhaps this would enable us to preserve and improvise the hard-earned fruits of this historic student movement.’⁸³

Hasty temperament and romantic vision, in the absence of modification by pragmatic judgement, often made those activists egoist in outlook, as Dipanjan Raychaudhuri admitted:

“What we realized that the student and youth movement would not progress in isolation. It must integrate itself with the struggle of the toiling masses. But this was not sufficient. Regarding such a vital issue like the relationship between the peasants-workers and the student-intelligentsia we were not able to shed the prejudices of traditional leftism.

...We said that man made the history of his own. The middle class intelligentsia would render its assistance to the struggle of the toiling masses but would not take its leadership. Any dictatorial approach from them would spoil such movement. But did we ourselves appreciate our wordings?

...Despite those tall talks, we always considered ourselves as their leaders and mentors. Our intention was good no doubt, but we never thought of making us useful to them. Rather we wanted to use them for our great purpose!’⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid. pp. 132-133

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 136

The danger involved in the attitude of 'guiding the masses' has been reflected in a writing of Krishna Bandyopadhyay. While working with the party's liberating mission in a village of Hooghly, she fumbled in committing the acts of violence and faced severe criticism. At her mature age she remembered this party line with deep regret:

"When I came to village Dronacharya who held the leadership of the party in that zone instructed me, 'You should mobilize the militant girls of the locality to form a women squad and convince them of our line of annihilation.' It was not the norm to question about the commands of the leaders. Yet, I was hesitant and asked, 'Why should we impose our ideas upon them? They must grow political consciousness and then they would take their own decisions....' Drone was visibly irritated and reacted, 'What makes you think that it is an imposition? Why are you underestimating those people as politically unconscious? You must not inject your typically middle class psyche of self-defence into them.' I failed to assess my leader. Nevertheless, I was unable to express my own sense of alienation that it was also an imposition upon me. It was a rude shock to the delicate mind of a nineteen-year-old girl. The deep sense of shame and indignation that inflicted upon me burst into tears. Now after the passing of so many years, I really regret for not being a bit bolder and to oppose the line of 'action'. Could I have done this, perhaps we could have avoided the untimely loss of many of our comrades like Drone."

Her ambiguity was shared by her class allies. While she was labouring to mobilize an action squad among the peasant women, one of the peasant girls who happened to be her friend reacted sharply:

"What would you gain by killing that old man*? He would immediately be succeeded by his son who would take control of his property. Suppose you would kill this successor too. But do you really hope that the sufferings of the poor people, like us, would come to an end only through a series of murders? ...Rather this line of 'action', instead of liberating the peasants, would be harmful to them."

She warned her sister:

“My dear sister, don’t forget that your sufferings cannot be shared by others. You must apply your own reason and just not carry out orders. You should also remember that those who are teaching us are outsiders and will go away. Do you think that it would be easy for us to face the consequence?”

The failure to convince the peasantfolk reinforced the dilemma of the party’s deputed activist who questioned herself:

“I could not defend myself in the face of such direct criticism. Rather I began to ponder whether in other places too the peasantfolk shared my friend’s notion that the decision of annihilation was imposed upon them. Finally, I came to the conclusion that such hesitation and dilemma were the products of my own ignorance and lack of class consciousness.”⁸⁵

Not only in dealing with the masses but also in controlling the party activists the leaders adopted the same dictatorial approach. Krishna Bandyopadhyay regretted about this dictatorial trend within the party:

“As I feel aggrieved now about religious fanaticism and all such bigotrous actions all around, I cannot but regret our own dogmatic attitude and blind faith. In the name of loyalty we were demanded of complete submission to such silly ideas and beliefs like ‘it is undeniable because our respected leader has told it’ or ‘our respected leader has predicted ’75 as the year of liberation’ and so on. If we considered a single person as our ‘respected leader’, how would we look at ‘others’? Later, however, some of the ‘others’ were accepted as ‘the party leader’, ‘our beloved leader’, etc.”

The demand for unquestioned loyalty to party command was matched by a mechanical interpretation of class, as Bandyopadhyay elaborated:

“We underwent a process of virtual brain-wash that class alliance meant complete reliance on peasants and workers and treating them as super-human. We refused to subscribe to the fact that these people too were susceptible to

⁸⁵ Bandyopadhyay Krishna: *Abirata Larai Khonj*, May 2001, pp. 89-91

* (The *jotedar* in that village, who had been identified as the class enemy)

human frailties. If anyone posed any counter-argument, that person was accused of losing the spirit of class politics. Such mechanical thinking was really regrettable.”⁸⁶

The uncritical approach towards an ideology reached its height at the face of police oppression and instead of integrating the cadres led the party to total discomfiture. Krishna Bandyopadhyay admitted:

“As the party lost its resilience to survive the police onslaught, the relations among the party members began to suffer from a growing sense of suspicion and mistrust. The opposition voice within the party sounded more fearsome than the threat of the class enemies outside. Such problem, however, is common to any underground party. In our case too, killing within the party became a serious challenge to us.”⁸⁷

Krishna Bandyopadhyay’s assessment and sentiment was virtually reiterated by Prasanta Chattopadhyay:

“The real problem of the party was its growing isolation from the people. The policy of our party was responsible for it. No doubt, it was extremely difficult for an underground party to keep up continuous touch with people. But the real problem lay elsewhere. The party was directed to a wrong way and gave us a wrong command. ‘Action’ was given priority to the maintenance of connection with the masses.

Besides, such ideas like ‘annihilation of class enemies is the mark of the revolutionary identity’, ‘guerrilla war is a superior form of class struggle’ were readily gaining ground. All these could only idealize ‘action’ and make it the primary objective of all cadres. The outcome was that very often actions lost their justification and yet were performed enthusiastically. The situation was unimaginable. The cadres who shouted for a class struggle at the crossing of Sinthi had a firm belief that Sinthi was village and Calcutta was a city, and by liberating Sinthi they would perform a guerrilla action. In such a situation, those who could not perform annihilation suffered from an

⁸⁶ Ibid. pp. 94-95

⁸⁷ Interview

inferiority complex. On the other hand, the experience of 'action' so rudely shocked some cadres as to put them into a moral dilemma. All the party members from the general rank to the leaders at the top level were misguided and confused."⁸⁸

Chattopadhyay, writing from hindsight, detected the error in application of theories without judging their compatibility with Indian conditions. He commented:

"In the writings of Che Guevara, in the struggle of Vietnam, all of which were our source of inspiration, two points were given special importance: i) consideration of the topographical conditions ii) cohesion of the armed groups. But some of our young cadres romanticized the whole idea. By annihilating the class enemies and by attaining martyrdom by themselves they tried to evolve a hasty and short cut to revolution. But the resistance of powerful state machinery could be crushed only through a protracted and sustained struggle. But most of our young students had neither the training nor the tenacity to undertake such a struggle. Emotion and visionary ideas pervaded all layers of the party."⁸⁹

Even those who had successfully made 'actions' did not always come back with a contended mind. On the contrary, as the confession of one of such activists in police custody shows that the destructive experiments often caused mental dislocation of many of the cadres. Purna Datta, a Naxalite of Birbhum who was in a murder squad to 'annihilate' the businessmen brothers of Garai family at Bahadurganj made a statement to the police in the 1970s:

"Our team had nearly seventy men including ten peasants. ... On the roof of the house these men first murdered Shricharan Garai. ... They came out with his chopped off head. The wife of Shricharan Garai was crying bitterly. Some of the murderers were mocking that lamentation. I was

⁸⁸ Interview

⁸⁹ Ibid.

shouting slogans loudly so that the tune of pathos would not penetrate into my ears. When I looked at the chopped off head, a feeling of a haunted house overpowered me. Suddenly, a huge uproar burst in. Our team was cheering to find out Shibu Garai and his brother Mahitosh Garai at the top of the house. Some of our men were infuriated and were about to kill Mahitosh. Shibu Garai was instantly murdered by Subodh Mondal and Dilip Mondal of Dulalgachi and others. When they were cutting his limbs, I left the place and went to the road. But there also I found that the action squad of Bahadurganj had captured Basudev Garai and were asking the neighbouring peasants whether they would murder him. Jaydev Datta was particularly aggressive. Soon Shyamal Ray appeared with the chopped off head and found a tree within the premise of the house. I carefully maintained a safe distance lest I would become stained by blood. A sharp tune of agony was coming from Shibu Garai's room. His sisters were wailing mentioning his name. His wife, however, was absolutely silenced by the shock. I did not see her. Paritosh Mondal threw a chopped off leg of Shibu Garai on her lap.

I earnestly wished to run away to a distant place, to a far off land where I would live unrecognized, undisturbed and isolated from everyone. A sense of sheer self-hatred engulfed me. I could not express myself, because had I done this, I would have been branded as weak and emotional. I could very well understand my incapability for armed struggle. I promised not to be involved into such violent actions in future. But life is not so easy! I am already considered as a hero at Rajnagar. Whenever I loiter in the village the ghastly sight of the assassination of Shibu Garai haunts me. He got married just a few months ago. The fate of his wife gnaws at the deep of my heart. How can I justify such an inhuman and unscrupulous action? Are we human beings at all? ...If they agree, I would arrange the marriage of widowed wife of Shibu Garai with Panchanan. ...For myself, I have firmly decided not to be the part of a murder squad again.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Collected from an interview with Amiya Samanta, who gave this information from his police diary.

The movement which identified the capacity to drain the blood of the enemies as the greatest mark of a revolutionary perhaps got its worst rebuff by the utmost effort of a 'successful' activist for not being stained by blood any more. The Naxalite movement gradually lost its vigour. After the death of Charu Mazumdar a revitalizing attempt was made and the second phase of the movement was launched by leaders like Mahadev Mukherjee. But this phase too was delusive and temporary. By the middle of the 1970s the party survived but the movement subsided. The forces of radicalism, dissipated by internal dissension, succumbed to ruthless suppression.

Chapter-VII

Backlash of Democracy – Politics in Ordeal (1971-1977)

Realigning the 'left'

While the left wing radicalism gradually lost its vigour, the leftists became further grounded in electoral politics. But in the electoral sphere the left forces were faced with two major obstacles: a) breakdown of negotiations of the left parties with their electoral partners b) consolidation of the political and social base of the Congress. The network of alliances of the left parties underwent a major reshuffle in the early 1970s. The ideological divide among the partners that defeated the logic of coalition politics in the two previous UF Governments remained as an indelible memory. Consequently, the choosing of political allies became the matter of most serious concern for all parties on the eve of the interim election. Ajoy Mukherjee, the former Chief Minister, expressed his firm decision not to forge any unity with the CPI(M). His assessment was that the Congress was corrupt but the CPI(M) was a party of '*satans*' and 'a bigger evil'.¹ Thus the group which had once defected from the Congress to form a non-Congress government was ideologically more comfortable with the Congress than its anti-Congress political partners.

The left camp itself was a divided house. The CPI was oscillating between its ideological adherence to a revolutionary ambition and the political fascination for the progressive policy

¹ *Hindustan Standard* (April 6, 1970)

of the Indira Government. Organizationally the split between the two Communist Parties was complete with the separation of their unions among the various professional groups. While the older communist party – the CPI had its students' union (AISF) and working class organization (AITUC), the CPI(M) too within a short period since its birth made a remarkable headway on popular fronts. It controlled teachers' association like ABTA (The All Bengal Teachers' Association) and WBCUTA (The West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association); backed the Coordination Committee of the State Government Employees' Unions and Associations and the 12th July Committee; dominated students' union like the SFI (Student Federation of India); established its own working class organization – CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions).²

Politically the CPI was found to be more inclined towards the Congress than the CPI (M), its ideological comrade. The CPI leaders maintained friendship and even kinship with the Congress leaders. The Congress leaders like V. K. Krishna Menon, K. D. Malaviya, Kamala Ratnam and Aruna Asaf Ali were in good terms with many CPI leaders. Renu Chakravorty of the CPI was a niece of Dr. B. C. Roy, the Congress Chief Minister. Bishwanath Mukherjee was the brother of Ajoy Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress. Kalyan Roy was the son of Kiran Shankar Roy, West Bengal's first Congress Home Minister. Ideologically too the CPI was more comfortable with the reformatory programmes of Indira Government than the aggressive rural policy of the CPI(M). The Nehruvian socialism, the legacy of which seemed to have been carried by Indira

² Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

Gandhi, was for the CPI not a 'hoax' but a genuine attempt for national development on socialistic line. This belief led the CPI to take the risk of splitting the party in 1964. In the early 1970s too this idea was vibrant in the CPI circles.³

This disunity among the leftist forces and their coalition partners took its political toll in the Elections of 1971. In this election the CPI(M) emerged as the largest political party. The percentage of votes increased from 19.6 in 1969 to 32.4 in 1971 and the percentage of seats increased from 29 to 40. It also established itself as the first of the second party in terms of vote received in every district except Midnapore and Purulia.⁴ In rural areas, particularly, the success was spectacular. But the internal dissension within the left camp prevented it from enjoying the full fruits of this victory. The CPI(M) remained outside the circle of power, while the CPI joined the coalition ministry which came to power with the support of the Congress and with Ajoy Mukherjee at its head. But the division within the Bangla Congress between Ajoy Mukherjee's and Sushil Dhara's groups soon brought down the Government. The President's Rule was imposed.⁵

The split and confusion among the communists gave an advantage to the Congress. The social base of the Congress Party too was bolstered up by the domestic events as well as international happenings. Though the Congress itself too was a

³ 1978 *Sale Bhatinda Party Congresser Khasra Review Samparke Abhimat* (An Opinion about The Draft Review of Bhatinda Party Congress in 1978) Collected from *Bishwanath Mukherjee: Tattwa O Sangramer Pratik*

⁴ *Election Results of West Bengal-Statistics and Analysis*, published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee

⁵ *Hindustan Standard* (June 26, 1971)

divided house, the Congress led by Indira Gandhi which was the ruling party at the Centre consolidated its power and influence. Even the leftist parties could not ignore the fact that the nationalization of banks, the abolition of the allowance paid to the princely houses were a few populist measures that strengthened the social base of the Congress Government and the Party.

The leftists, however, also alleged that the process of restoration of the social base of the Congress Party was essentially a process of physically liquidating all oppositions. The two UF regimes of the previous years left a frightful experience for the businessmen and the landlord classes. But since the fall of the Second UF Government in 1970 these two social classes were anxious to recover their lost grounds. Eviction of the peasants from land in rural areas and retrenchment of the workers from factories in urban centres became rampant. The leftists suspected a conspiracy of the Congress Party and its 'social allies' – the capitalists and the landowners – to uproot the democratic forces from the soil of West Bengal and stabilize a reactionary regime in the state.⁶

The Bangladesh War and the Communists

Nevertheless, the leftists could not deny the political gains that the Congress made from the glorious victory of India in the Bangladesh War in 1971. The nationalist image which sustained

⁶ *Natajanu Hobar Cheye Mruttyu Bhalo* (Death Is Better Than Surrender) (A speech given by Jyoti Basu in West Bengal Legislative Assembly on May 11, 1971) Collected from *Jyoti Basu Nirbachita Rachana Sangraha (Dwitiya Khanda)* & Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*

the Congress Party in the popular psyche throughout the anti-British struggle seemed to have been revived by the successful and appreciable role of the Congress Government at the Centre in the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. The Communist Parties, despite their support for the cause, lagged behind in deriving political benefits out of it. The CPI(M) had moral sympathy for the freedom fighters and were also ready to give concrete assistance to them. But the CPI(M) leaders did not make a common cause with the Congress on the issue. Defending the demand for self-determination by the Bangladeshis the Congress Government projected itself as the champion of nationalism. The CPI(M), on the other hand, explained the whole issue in the language of class. In an article Promode Dasgupta explained the nature of the Bangladesh War:

“We should explain the nature of the Bangladesh War in terms of the ideology of class struggle and distinguish it from the Vietnam War. The former one is neither class struggle nor the war of liberation. On the contrary, it is a historical fact that the people of East Pakistan never demanded complete separation from Pakistan and to form a state of their own. Their only demand was autonomy which would relieve them of the economic oppression and the tyranny of military rule by the foreign forces as well as by the Central Government. In other words, by defeating the military junta in politics and the vested interests in economy the mass upheaval in East Pakistan aimed at creating a democratic government. But the autocratic government in Pakistan did not grant that minimum concession to the people of the east. By totally ignoring the electoral verdict of the people of East Bengal the ruling junta in Pakistan launched a military campaign against them. In such a situation the people of East Pakistan had no other option but to raise a war of resistance for the fulfilment of their democratic aspirations.”

However, he was not optimistic about its transformation into a class war. He commented:

“The mass struggle in Bangladesh, however, would impart a lesson for us. We must share the responsibility to make it successful. First, we must offer all sorts of assistance to the fighting people of Bangladesh.

Besides, we should take initiative to bring the labouring masses of that land to the forefront of the struggle. If the working class of Bangladesh would assert its leadership in this struggle that would open up a new possibility.”⁷

Jyoti Basu in a public meeting criticized the Congress Government in the following manner:

“The Congress Government is showing sympathy for the freedom struggle in Bangladesh. But in its own state in West Bengal it is suppressing the democratic aspirations of the people by military and armed forces. It is not at all a sincere effort. It is sheer hypocrisy.”⁸

So, at one level, the CPI(M) leaders appreciated the nationalist content of the struggle of East Pakistan for Bangladesh and also attempted to add the dimension of a class war to it. At another level, they tried to counteract the nationalist message of the Congress Party by the idioms of class struggle. But the spirit of populism seemed to have been overpowered by the wave of patriotism.

The CPI, however, found it as a gross miscalculation to apply the ideology of class struggle to a purely nationalist issue. Consequently, it provided unequivocal support to the freedom struggle of Bangladesh and the Congress policy in this sphere. In a report of the CPI it was said:

“When a decision was taken in an all party committee to convene a general assembly of all political parties and the citizens irrespective of their political background, the CPI(M) did not endorse it. The CPI(M) did not agree to come to a common platform with the Government which had

⁷ *Bangladesher Bartaman Yuddher Baishishtya*—Promode Dasguptar *Bishleshan* (The Characteristics of The Present War in Bangladesh – An Analysis of Promode Dasgupta), *Ganashakti* (April 20, 1971)

⁸ *Sanyukta Bampanthi Fronter Ahbane Shahid Minar Maydane Jyoti Basur Bhashan* (Speech of Jyoti Basu at The Premise of *Shahid Minar* at The Call of The United Left Front)—Report: *Ganashakti* (March 30, 1971)

launched oppression on the CPI(M) activists. CPI leader Bishwanath Mukherjee commented that the CPI too was not at all happy with this Government. The CPI was aggrieved by the fact that hundreds of its activists in agrarian field were absconding arrest warrant, and the number of those who were under trial either in prison or outside prison in bail, crossed several thousand. Yet, India's support to Bangladesh should not be conditional and limited by any sectarian consideration. He questioned whether it would be a proper action for the Indian peasants to abstain from participating in a patriotic war against the US imperialism because the Government of India was oppressive. But the CPI(M) failed to appreciate a national cause."⁹

Nevertheless, by exploiting the popular sentiment of patriotism the Congress was able to take command over the situation.

The Elections of '72

Naturally in this situation the Elections of 1972 became a prestige issue for the Congress. But the challenge was faced in a somewhat unconstitutional manner. Allegation of rigging by the Congress seemed credible in the context of the extraordinarily poor performance of the opposition in the elections. The CPI(M) leaders accused the Congress of subverting the democratic process. Jyoti Basu in his reminiscences recounted this 'unconstitutional' onslaught over a constitutional practice:

"March 11, 1972. It was a black day in the history of parliamentary democracy in West Bengal as well as in India. The state politics had an unprecedented experience of snatching of voting right by bomb, bullet and bayonet by the Congress, the rightist Communist Party along with the police

⁹ Dasgupta Jyoti: *Bangladesher Muktisangrame CPM Netritwer Ghrinya Bhumika* (The Obnoxious Role of The CPM Leadership in The War of Liberation in Bangladesh), West Bengal State Council, Communist Party of India, Kolkata, 1971, pp. 10-11

and administration. On the day of election 9 of our cadres and supporters became victims to the Congress hooliganism. All the sensible persons in the state were horrified at such naked conspiracy organized and sponsored by the Centre itself. Siddhartha Shankar Roy who had been appointed by the Centre to head the caretaker government in the state himself from the Writers' Building led this fascist attack on democracy in the state and the constitutional rights of the citizens."

Behind this hooliganism Basu found an evil design worked out by the party in power with the active connivance of the state's bureaucracy. The process started well before the election. Attacking and assassinating the left candidates and their supporters, silencing all opposition voices, marginalizing the neutral and impartial employees of administration the Congress Party set a backdrop of terror against which the election was staged. The process reached its culmination on the day of election. Violation of all constitutional norms along with the rampant use of firearms marred the polling process. In all cases the ruffians were alleged to be indulged and even protected by the Congress, the rightist communists and the police force. Jyoti Basu noted his experience:

"In my electoral constituency at Baranagar election was totally disrupted. In more than hundred booths among the 135 booths in that constituency the polling agents had been driven away before the electoral process started. The ballot boxes were snatched away. All the ballot papers were marked in favour of the rightist communist candidate and were put into the boxes. When I reached Baranagar I found the polling process virtually complete in most of the booths by 10-30/11 a.m. Without delay, by 11-30 I reported to the S.D.O. of Barrackpore who was the returning officer of Baranagar constituency, "when in the morning I arrived at Baranagar constituency, I found no possibility of fair and impartial election. The hooligans of the Congress and the CPI with active assistance of the police made a violent attack on our supporters by indiscriminate use of daggers and firearms. They drove away our polling agents, snatched the ballot papers and then by totally ignoring the polling officers stamped them.

This happened in nearly 100 booths among the total 135 booths of the constituency. The military force too was silent spectator. In such a situation I make an earnest appeal to you for the immediate postponement of the electoral process at Baranagar. At 11 a.m. I made this appeal to the D. M. of 24 Parganas and informed the officer-in-charge. I could not communicate with you over telephone and, therefore, sent this application for your immediate action.” Dispatching this application I went to the party office. Already a number of incidents of rampant rigging at different booths have been reported there. By noon we were informed that 32000 voters at Maniktala, 25000 voters at Entally, 50000 voters at Tallygunj, 30000 voters at Ballygunj were forcibly prevented from casting their votes. Thousands of voters who were supposed to be our supporters were bullied and compelled to go back from outside the booths. Within a few hours after the polling had started, the whole process was disrupted by hooliganism at Kharda, Dum Dum, Panihati, Kamarhati, Noapara, Titagarh, Sonarpur in the District of 24 Parganas; at Bali, Northern Howrah, Central Howrah, Southern Howrah, Domjur, Amta in the District of Howrah. The same experience was shared by the voters of Nadanghat, Kalna, Memary, Southern Bardhaman, Northern Bardhaman, Manteshwar, Barabani, Asansol, Khandaghoosh, Durgapur in the District of Bardhaman. By evening we came to know that in those constituencies the Congress gangsters with the active co-operation of the police captured most of the booths and made election a total farce.”¹⁰

A report in a newspaper which had no sympathy for the communists described the day as more or less peaceful. Yet, the report of this paper noted a number of incidents of bloodshed, false voting and all other corrupt practices:

“D. K. Guha, the chief election officer of the state, in a press conference admitted that he had received many allegations from the voters regarding disturbances to smooth polling. However, he did not make any comment on these allegations because these were subjects to investigation. Besides, he argued that there was no such report that required postponement of polling process in any booth.

¹⁰ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 183-185

...It was 9 a. m. The crossing of the V.I.P. Road and Maniktala Main Road was shuddered by the sound of firing. Everyone became curious. A policeman suspected it as the firing from pipe gun.

While proceeding along Upen Banerjee Road, I met a few boys carrying two heavily injured bodies. They placed the two bodies in a taxi which passed in a rushing speed.

...This place was marked as a CPI(M) zone. The existence of any other party could not be traced there.

...The posters of the Congress Party citing the appeal of the Prime Minister virtually covered Sealdah region. The voters were peacefully proceeding to the booths. The situation was absolutely normal everywhere.

...There are three offices of the R.S.P. on the main street of Dhakuria. Surprisingly however, all the chairs and tables were found to be dumped on the ground in both of the offices of the Communist Party. We were really shocked at a booth at Tallygunj. Police was nowhere. On the contrary, as soon as a few young men found us, they virtually chased us. With a lot of slang terms they began to shout, 'Get out from here. Don't take photos. We know what rubbish you would write in your papers, etc.'

In another booth of the same constituency we found a long line of voters. But whenever our photographer attempted to take a few snaps, the same experience was repeated. The angry young men reacted immediately, 'Go out. Don't try to take any photo.'

...The polling centre at Lady Brabourne College too was crowded with voters. But we found a lot of chaos there. Some veiled Muslim women came to vote. But they were accompanied by unknown male voters. The polling process was much delayed. The voters were irritated. Some heated arguments too took place. At the time of exit we were caught by the conversation of a few veiled Muslim women along with a young man. The angry tone of the young man came to us, 'Why have you come? Your votes have already been cast.'

The place from Rajabazar to Narkeldanga was considered as the Congress zone. It was followed by the CPI(M) zone. Here too the crowd of voters was a common sight. All the polling booths were heavily guarded by

the police. The military force was patrolling the roads. The Congress voters too seemed to have a smooth entry there.

...In Calcutta and the sub-urban areas electoral conflicts and police firing have killed today as many as nine persons.”¹¹

Terror and falsification continued during counting and other post-poll processes, as Jyoti Basu continued:

“After the horrible experience of the day of election, the leftist parties apprehended that the counting too would be meddled by the hooligans patronized by the Congress and the rightist Communist Party. The anticipation proved to be true. Even after the abominable rigging they did not take any risk. During the counting on March 13 all pretensions of fairness and political principle were shed off, and it became clear that the electoral results would be totally fabricated by the ruling party to suit its purpose. The officers who were in charge of counting expressed their complete inability to violate the dictations of the Congress and the CPI cadres. The ballot boxes, which were not properly sealed, the ballot papers, which were either unsigned by the presiding officers or having forged signatures, were accepted. Some ballot papers, which had been kept in bunches, were presented for counting. Some ballot papers were collected from the near-by roads of the counting cells. The ballot papers stamped in one constituency were counted in other. Sometimes the number of ballot papers exceeded the number of votes cast in the polling booths. Any allegation by the leftist counting agents or the election agents regarding such malpractice was not entertained by the returning officers. Some of the returning officers who protested against such unlawful activities were threatened with guns and pistols, and all these happened before the eyes of the police and the military. Sometimes the ballot papers marked in favour of the leftist candidates were bundled together and these were wrapped by a few others stamped for the Congress and then the whole bunch was considered as a set of votes for the Congress. On many occasions, the ballot papers which were detected to be marked in favour of the leftist candidates were branded with an additional mark for another candidate and thus were cancelled. Besides, when in some

¹¹ *Yugantar*, March 12, 1972

cases after the first round of counting the leftist candidates were found to lead, the counting was postponed and the leftist election or polling agents were expelled. Then on the eve of the beginning of the second round of counting, invariably the Congress or the CPI candidates were found to lead. On some occasions, the polling or counting agents protested against such malpractice. But they were silenced by the threat of murder. Though no one other than the candidates and those agents who had prior permission should have been present in the counting zone, the armed ruffians of the Congress and the CPI violated all electoral norms. At the presence of the police and the military they intruded upon the counting centers and meddled with the ballot papers. Again, in more than one cases, though the counting showed the victory of the leftist candidates, the returning officers declared the Congress candidates as victorious.”¹²

The newspaper report also confirmed the basis of such allegation:

“After the day of election the conflicts and strives among the different parties in Calcutta and sub-urban areas resulted in the death of two young men and the injury of a few others. Curfew which was declared yesterday is continuing today as a precautionary measure. Today the curfew will remain active for 9 hours since 8 p.m. throughout Barrackpur Sub-Division and since 10 p.m. at Jadavpur.

Today in many areas like Baranagar, Bijpur, Tiljala, Watganj, Belgachia post-electoral conflicts have assumed an alarming proportion.”¹³

The result was that the CPI(M) could win merely 14 seats. On the other hand, the Congress virtually monopolized by winning 216 seats in an Assembly of 280 seats. The CPI which allied with the Congress won 35 seats.¹⁴ Subsequently the

¹² Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 185-186

¹³ *Yugantar* (March 13, 1972)

¹⁴ *The Statesman* (March 1972)

Congress Government was again alleged to have unleashed a semi-fascist terror against the opposition parties, particularly the CPI(M). The CPI(M) boycotted the Assembly in protest of rigging and concentrated on mass mobilization against the oppressive and unethical Congress Government.

The Election of 1972, however, revealed some facts, both positive and negative, about communist politics of the state. One interesting finding of the election result was that though the Congress achieved victory in some of the strongholds of the CPI(M) in some of the Congress strongholds where rigging was perhaps thought unnecessary the CPI(M) fared well and won at such seats like Garden Reach, a place in neighbourhood of Calcutta inhabited by dock workers. Though the CPI(M) won in only a few seats, in terms of the votes secured the party emerged as a strong force in electoral politics. For example, even though the CPI(M) won only 14 of the 208 seats it contested in 1972, in nearly all other seats the party came a close second. Also in some constituencies it keenly contested with the victorious Congress Party. Moreover the CPI(M) lost security deposits only in 9 seats, a very small number in comparison to the other Indian political parties.¹⁵

For the CPI(M) the Elections of 1972 revealed some negative features as well. Though the CPI(M) groaned against the 'unfair' means of the Congress Party causing the debacle of the Left Front in the election, certain weak points in the

¹⁵ Singh V. B. and Bose Shankar: *State Elections in India: Data Handbook on Vidhan Sabha Elections (1952-85)*, Vol-3, New Delhi, 1987

organization and policies of the main left force too could not be overlooked. The CPI ascribed the debacle to the miscalculated steps of the CPI(M). On CPI's version:

a) The CPI(M) along with its left allies like the Forward Bloc and the SUCI were said to have based their entire electoral campaign on blind opposition to the Congress and ignored the progressive aspect of the Congress Government. This was a negative approach which, according to the CPI, did not impress the people.

b) The CPI also felt that the policy of terror and political murders pursued by the CPI(M) during the few years preceding the election alienated a large number of voters. In the previous elections, according to the assessment of the CPI, the CPI(M) managed to derive a few dividends from those nefarious activities. But terror and intimidation without a sound policy and programme failed to intimidate the popular sentiments for long.

c) Another factor which the CPI suspected to have contributed to the CPI(M)'s isolation was its equivocal attitude towards the liberation struggle of Bangladesh and its dubious activities in that respect. Its attempts to legitimize a small and sectarian group against the five-party alliance in Bangladesh which included the Awami League, National Awami Party and the Communist Party of Bangladesh along with a few other parties was maligning the unity the people of Bangladesh in their struggle against American imperialism bolstering up the oppressive military regime in Pakistan. This possibly alienated

sections of West Bengal's intelligentsia and a section of the refugee population among whom the CPI(M) had always a strong influence.¹⁶

The CPI(M), however, considered the debacle as the outcome of the undemocratic activities of the Congress. The only failure on their part, as they admitted, was not to have the premonition of the terror the Congress had designed:

"The nature and extent of such terror which the Congress had unleashed on the day of election was beyond our imagination. We expected that however aggressive the Congress cadres might have been before the election, at least on the very day they would restrain themselves and the administration too maintain a show of neutrality. But all our expectations belied to the ground as Siddhartha Ray and his retinue declared an open war against the people. By tearing off the facade of democracy they showed, how heinous and tyrannical they might be, to meet the lust for power. This experience once again proved the irrefutable historical proposition that the communists are the first victim to terror and repression which then target the people as a whole."¹⁷

Aftermath of '72

The electoral experience of '72, however, had a lingering effect on the communists, particularly the CPI(M). The democratic norms were violated with impunity not only in electoral practices but also in all spheres of political life afterwards. A severe assault of the ruling Congress that used the administrative machinery to liquidate the communists, particularly the CPI(M) and its supporters, made the situation

¹⁶ Banerjee Gopal: West Bengal CPI reviews Assembly Election Results *New Age* (Weekly) (April 16, 1972)

¹⁷ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, p. 183

extremely critical. The brutal oppression which was unleashed by the young Congress cadres and treated with some amount of indulgence by the police terrorized different sections of the population who showed the slightest sympathy for the communists. Not only the political leaders and cadres of the CPI(M) and other radical communist groups were imprisoned and tortured, but lay off and retrenchment in factories, criminal operations in villages, indiscriminate use of MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act), physical assault and humiliation of the teachers and the students in the premises of their educational institutions became rampant. Jyoti Basu gave a description of this savage attack:

“It was a time when famine was knocking at rural Bengal. The tide of hungry people was flowing from villages to urban centres. At the same time, an obnoxious design made up by the government itself was followed to uproot the democracy in the state. Even after the usurpation of power through the horrible rigging of '72 that made the Assembly a farce, the Congress leaders neither at the state nor at the Centre felt secure. They all suffered from a communist phobia. Morality had lost its relevance; democracy was paralyzed; humanism was disgraced; and the CPI(M) was tended to be smashed by savage attack. Immediately after empowerment Siddhartha Shankar Roy liquidated all the elected municipalities of the state including the Calcutta Corporation. The succeeding measures heightened the terror. Indiscriminate slaughter, rampant arrest, filing of cases on false allegations, detention without trial and evacuation from the locality became the regular fate of our cadres. Countless number of teachers, workers, and other government and private employees could not attend their offices in fear of getting assaulted. The offices of our party, trade unions and other mass organizations were burnt and seized. An undeclared Emergency reigned over the whole state. We had already lost all our rights as an opposition party in a democracy. Now everyday we became exposed to new measures of aggression by the ruling party. All these were guided by the intelligence bureau of the Central Government (Research and Analytical Wing-RAW). After a point of time the ruling party found the Naxalites no longer usable

to counterpoise us. Hence the Naxalites too began to be savagely attacked by the Congress Government. Despite our hostility towards the Naxalites, we, however, did not support this vicious assault on them by the ruling Congress. The entire administrative mechanism justified its existence as an agency of repression of the CPI(M) and the Naxalites.”¹⁸

Even the anti-communist newspapers could not but warn against the adverse impact of the violence and malpractice of the Congress fists on ordinary people:

“Without an immediate and rigorous action against such hooliganism and disorder, the Congress Government would endanger itself. It is a great challenge to the provincial Congress leaders, particularly to the leaders of the *Chhatra Parishad* and the Youth Congress. The people of West Bengal have been fed up with this incessant violence and are earnestly longing for peace. The Congress leaders too have admitted the growth of this popular urge. So now all tall talks of peace in their voice will be ridiculous. ...Fortunately, however, the leaders of the *Chhatra Parishad* and the Youth Congress have felt the gravity of the situation. All the committees under these two organizations have been promised to be reconstructed. On the other hand, Sudip Bandyopadhyay, the President of the Youth Congress, has made an urgent appeal to arrest all those who are conducting all sorts of anti-social activities in the name of the Youth Congress. Even if the party apparently suffers from such strong actions, it must take that risk. Indeed, it is absolutely a wrong idea that by purging the anti-social rowdies the party would weaken itself. Rather, the Congress would successfully utilize its youth force only by organizing it as an integrated political force.”¹⁹

In the assessment of the CPI(M) leadership the violence of the early 1970s, however, was not a mere sporadic happening to wreck immediate vengeance. It was rather a calculated attempt on the part of a social class, backed by political force, to restore its power – a class war, in other words, to dismember the people’s

¹⁸ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 192-193

¹⁹ Editorial, *Yugantar* (April 19, 1972)

party in agrarian and labour fronts. Jayanta Bhattacharya who participated in the struggle of the Krishaksabha to survive this onslaught explained the political strategy of the Congress:

“It is the spread and success of the peasant movement, particularly the anti-feudal movement for land rights, that created the base of the CPI(M) in the predominantly agrarian constituencies in 1971 and contributed to the party’s remarkable success in the election. In the post-election period the ruling party made a stifling attack on the democratic, especially the agrarian movements, particularly after the declaration of the President’s rule and the empowerment of Siddhartha Shankar Roy as the Central minister in 1971. Rampant arrest, cases on false allegations had already been started. So far the mode of assassination was secret killing and attack on individuals. But, since this method was not very much effective, a new mode of operation was invented. By identifying the crucial zones of mobilization the Congress ruffians launched an organized and collective attack. All these took place with the direct assistance of the police and the open patronage of the government.”²⁰

A report of the 22nd conference of the provincial Krishaksabha held in Baharampur in Murshidabad District in November 1972 revealed that between 1970 and 1972 the number of martyrs on the agrarian front reached a staggering figure of 218 that included 92 in Bardhaman, 52 in 24 Parganas, 13 in Hooghly, 8 in Midnapur, 12 in Nadia, 16 in Jalpaiguri, 7 in Murshidabad. The list contained along with the names of the party’s followers a number of peasant leaders like Shivshankar Chaudhuri, Mahadev Banerjee, Abdul Gaffur, Sudhangshu Datta, Santosh Bhattacharya and even a lawyer like Bhavadish Ray who used to plead for the peasants in their legal battles.²¹

²⁰ Bhattacharya Jayanta: *Pashchimanga. Jamir Andolan O Bhumi Sanskar*, p. 172

²¹ Collected from Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishaksabhar Itihas*

The orgy of violence has been expressed in the words of Sadhan Chattopadhyay who had been a school teacher in the '70s:

“The politics of murder began with the clash between the CPI(M) and the naxalites. It was fratricidal politics. In the '70s, particularly after the capture of power at absolute majority by the Congress in 1972 the ruling group began to counter this politics of violence with teeth and nails. Police atrocities were accompanied by calculated deployment of the hooligans. These ruffians often with the camouflage of political cadres spied the secret activities of the left parties, particularly the naxalites. The left parties also initially used them in annihilating their class enemies. Finally, they themselves became victims to political spies. Many idealist and dedicated leaders and cadres of both the CPI and the CPI(M) succumbed to this politics of terror. The spirit of vengeance vitiated the political atmosphere.

The atrocities became boundless since '72. Rowdysm and murder became accompanied by uprooting from residences. Many of the leading figures as well as the cadres of the CPI(M) were forced to leave their 'home and homeland' due to the threat of the ruffians who had been openly instigated by the Congress Government.”²²

The backlash of terror did not spare the world of art and literature and even literacy. The chastity of education system was lost to hooliganism. Spoiling the examination process through all kinds of unfair means, assault and assassination of teachers, disgracing the image of Rabindranath in the campus of the University of Calcutta allegedly by the student wing of the Congress vitiated the academic life of the state.²³ Poets and novelists, musicians and actors, painters and essayists anyone

²² Interview taken by me, May 2008

²³ Bandyopadhyay Indranath: Paye Paye Path Chala (Making A Pedestrian's Way) Collected from *Sanskritik Andolan Atit O Bartaman – Sankalan* (Cultural Movements: Past and Present – Anthology), Kolkata, 1980

of whom raised a voice of opposition became victims to brutal suppression. Sarojmohun Mitra, an intellectual of the age, remembered those days:

“IPTA was a close associate to the mass movements. This tradition can be traced long before the seventies. In the hard days of the seventies the tradition continued, as the artists and workers of the IPTA took all the risks to sustain the spirit of popular upsurge. Consequently, they became vulnerable to terror and autrocities.”

Mitra informed us that as many as eight members of the IPTA succumbed to this tyrannical onslaught. The names included Professor Satyendranath Chakrabarty, who was the organizer of the Belur branch of the IPTA; Dulal Adhikari and Anil Patra of Khardah branch; Saral Ray and Adhir Chakrabarty, who belonged to Panihati branch, Shankar Dutta and Kalyan Banerjee of Jorabagan branch. Kidnapping, court cases on false allegations were frequent. Ashu Mukherjee who was a poor blind actor of the IPTA was severely beaten. Instead of taking actions against the hooligans the police rather was alleged to have identified Mukherjee as a murderer.

“This terror”, Mitra continued, “was added with further intensity since 1972. ...It was not only the handiwork of the hooligans who were deployed by the ruling party but the police also pounced on the playwrights and actors to silence them. ...They not only targeted the IPTA but no organization bearing progressive ideas was spared.”

Thus the show of such plays like *Haradhaner Dashti Chhele* (Ten Sons of Haradhan), *Duhswapner Nagari* (A City of Nightmare), *Hachchheta Ki* (What is Happening); performances of some musical compositions like *Amar Srikanta* (Immortal Srikanta), *Gambhira* (a musical tradition of Maldah) were marred by ruffianism. The cultural organizations like

Krishti Samsad of Midnapore, *Pragati Pathachakra* of Kalikapur faced severe persecution. Sarojmohun Mitra, however, counted a positive impact of this policy of suppression. He wrote:

“These incidents were not reported in the widely circulated newspapers. But they spreaded through gossips and rumours. Nevertheless, the actors with their solemn vow of boosting up the terror-stricken people continued to stage their new endeavours.”²⁴

Sadhan Chattopadhyay narrated his own experience:

“During this period a newspaper named *Satyayuga* played a significant role in mobilizing popular opinion against the ‘reign of terror’. No wonder that this newspaper became victim to ruthless suppression. I used to collect the issues of this paper secretly from a stall. Not only the publisher and the editor but the readers and the vendors of this paper were equally vulnerable to harassment and attack.”

Not only the culture of opposition and resistance was crumbled but a conscious cultivation of a parallel stream of culture took place to legitimize the reign of terror. Sadhan Chattopadhyay elaborated:

“Stifling of the opposition culture was accompanied by a process of conscious cultivation of an alternative culture to ensure the ideological legitimacy of a tyrannical regime. The shameless flattery by a group of artists and literati, reckless revelry in the name of cultural conference gave birth to a culture which was neither familiar nor acceptable to the majority of the Bengali people groomed in a leftist cultural setting.”

²⁴ Mitra Sarojmohun: *Sattar Dasaker Swairatantrik Akraman O Bangla Sahityer Pratibadi Bhumika* (Tyrannical Aggression during the Seventies and The Protestant Role of The Bengali Literature)

Collected from *Samay O Sanskriti: Pashchimanga Ganatantrik Lekhak Shilpi Sangha Rajya Committee* (Time and Culture: West Bengal Democratic Writers and Artists' Association State Committee), Kolkata, 1987, p. 54

All these experiences led him to feel in retrospect that:

“The politics of West Bengal became vulnerable to hooliganism and suppression since the early ’70s. The Emergency legitimized this illegitimate practice. Indeed, when the Emergency was imposed, the people of the state had already adapted to a tyrannical regime.”²⁵

The CPI(M): Responses and Reactions

Consequently, the challenge for the CPI(M) in the early 1970s was to devise a strategy of survival in the face of such oppression by the ruling party by providing an effective leadership to sustain militant opposition against an oppressive regime. The brutal repression, however, was partially and temporarily successful in paralyzing the party’s revolutionary zeal. Jayanta Bhattacharya recounted this ordeal when he subsequently wrote:

“The new mode of attack posed a great challenge to the peasant movement in the state. The repression was both intense and widespread. The mode of operation was designed to ruthlessly shatter the struggling force of the opposition at the base and thus to terrorize the other areas of mobilization. The common peasants, however spirited and organized they might be, could not stand up to such demonic attack.

...In this situation of an unprecedented terror the peasant movement failed to continue with its vigour, particularly in its earlier mode of action for protecting land and other rights. Many sharecroppers were evicted. A large volume of land which had been grabbed earlier out of the illegal possession of the landlords too went out of hand.”²⁶

²⁵ Interview

²⁶ Bhattacharya Jayanta: *Pashchimbanga: Jamir Andolan O Bhumi Sanskar*, pp. 175-176

The situation became further critical as organizationally the party could not cope with the crisis. Sudhangshu Dasgupta who by that time was entrusted with various organizational responsibilities found some complications within the party:

“The twelfth State Conference of our party was held at Midnapore on the eve of the Elections of '72. By that time we were hardly aware of the conspiracy of rigging made by the Congress Party. Nor could we guess its evil design from its election campaigns. We were confident about our victory in the election.

...In this year our ninth party congress was held at Madurai.

...In this congress the top-level leadership of the party was found intensely divided to formulate the strategy regarding various political issues. The unity of opinion in the party leadership that had been achieved during the last two congresses broke down. The party leaders also could not unite on the very crucial question of how to face the electoral conspiracy and the post-election terror unleashed by the Congress Party.”

Harekrishna Konar who was a member of the Central Committee and was in charge of the peasant front in the party in the same tone repeated: “We were not prepared for what had happened at the polls and the events that followed thereafter.” He identified ‘a politico-organizational crisis’ which ‘bewildered party leadership in the state’. This bewilderment of the party leadership had a debilitating impact upon both the party’s mass following and the party ranks. On the one hand, when “the masses were spontaneously moving ahead” the leadership apparently failed to take
/ any ‘positive action’ and was ‘sticking to the old ritual of occasionally organizing processions and sometimes squatting’. On the other hand, the leadership also confessed to have failed to provide adequate help to the party comrades who had been evicted from their base areas by the terrorist attack of the opposition parties and

came for shelter in Calcutta. In such a situation, as Mr Konar admitted that it was bound to encourage the 'trends of petitbourgeois revolutionism'.²⁷

The reports and resolutions in the party congress and the Central Committee admitted the weakness of the party organization as a matter of grave concern:

"Our Party must recognise its present weakness in order to overcome them quickly. Compared to the needs of the situation, the organized strength is not up to the mark. The quality of Party membership, the ideological equipment – all these require to be strengthened in a great measure. In fact, there is hang-over of the old past in many of our activities and actions.

...Our failure to take up seriously the organizational task both of the party level and in the mass organizations is reflected both in the states and areas where we are a really strong political and mass force as in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, and in most of the other states or areas where our movement is weak as in the Hindi-speaking or other states. This is reflected even in the enlistment of membership of the Party and in the mass organizations.

Further, our Party has been facing growing repression in different states²⁸, where it has been heading the developing mass struggles. The semi-fascist terror it had to face in West Bengal, the continued terror and denial of any democratic rights for our Party, trade union and other mass functionaries to live and work freely in certain areas of West Bengal, is clear warning of what we should expect from the Congress ruling classes. As such, it becomes an absolutely urgent task to develop our party

²⁷ *The Statesman* (January 16, 1974)

²⁸ In other states like Tripura, Kerala, which had been the stronghold of the CPI(M), the party was out of power in the mid '70s and, while organizing mass movements, faced repression from the ruling parties. (Basu Pradip Kumar: *The Communist Movement in Tripura*, Kolkata, 1996 & Nossiter T. J.: *Communism in Kerala*)

organization in such a way as it could face the enemy onslaughts and develop the revolutionary mass movement in face of every twist and turn in the situation.”²⁹

Amidst this widespread pessimism the organizational strength of the party got a further rebuff with the death of two stalwarts like Muzaffar Ahmad in December 1973 and Harekrishna Konar in July 1974. Factionalism within the party came to surface. Promode Dasgupta and some of his close followers who came to prominence were disliked by some others for showing dictatorial tendencies. While some prominent activists, like Ganesh Ghosh, close to the old stalwarts, were marginalized, a few like Piyush Dasgupta had to leave the party.³⁰ No doubt, in such a situation passive suffering without organized defence and mobilization was inevitably weakening the CPI(M)’s position.

Policies and Programmes

However, it was not a one-sided story of surrender and dissipation. The resolution of the Central Committee of the party at its Muzaffarpur session set a guideline to streamline the party organization. Areas like party membership; party committees were identified as matters of primary concern. Regarding party membership, the criterion for the continuation of a member’s name in the party roll was not limited to the collection of the

²⁹ *Immediate Organizational Tasks*

Resolution adopted by the Central Committee of the CPI(M) in its Muzaffarpur Session on March 9-15, 1973

Collected from *Documents of the Communist Movement in India* Vol.-XVI, pp. 103-105

³⁰ *Hindustan Standard*, May 1974

annual fee alone. Membership was renewed on the basis of a review of the activities of the member in the past year. Emphasis was given on educating the members through party literature and activating them through assignments of specific responsibilities. Class composition of the party, as reflected in the membership list that was an indication of the party's support base came to be reviewed at regular intervals. Similarly, the party committees at all layers were reactivated. Here the following points were noted:

a) Emphasis was placed on organizing the branches of the party on functional or factory or institutional basis. The idea was that, instead of undertaking party jobs and general work in places of residence, organization of the party branches in work places would consolidate the party's base among the masses.

b) The plan also suggested a change in the style of functioning by party committees. In this regard, two things were emphasized. At one level, instead of depending on individual decision and command, however prompt and prudent they were, collective or team leadership was encouraged. At another level, by way of debates in the party committees and the interaction between the Central and the local leadership collective opinions had to be formed. The dissenting tendencies, however, had to be strongly contained. While there were apprehensions that the concentration of power would destroy the individual initiatives, the absence of a command structure was looked upon as equally dangerous for the cohesion of the party.

The elaborate reform in the party organization was associated with a reorientation of the party programme. Anil Biswas who was in the 1970s a young and rising star in the

party and later became the Secretary of the CPI(M)'s State Committee in West Bengal, explicated this new approach:

"We adopted a new principle, 'discard all banners or party flag'. Instead of mobilization through political line, we undertook a programme of social and economic reforms and thus wanted to ensure the support base of our party among particular social classes."³¹

The application of this strategy produced in the party the resilience to overcome the severe political crisis, as Muhammad Abdullah Rasul noted in writing the history of the Krishaksabha:

"Despite obstacles and constraints, Krishaksabha continued its activities through the movement for the protection of crop in 1972-73; the movement to stop eviction and ensure relief, wage and regular employment for the agrarian labourers and the rural poor in 1971; the food movement; the movement to fix fair price of jute and meet other demands of the jute producers; and finally the movement to protect crop and democratic rights of the peasants in 1973-74."³²

The novelty of this programme was that it wanted to launch a more concerted movement of social mobilization and economic reforms on the basis of the class unity of the peasants and the ailing masses in general than a political strategy to capture power.

The same strategy was applied on the labour front too. The vindictive reaction that manifested itself in the agrarian life by the landlords and their political bosses was equally intense in the industrial field and the service sector where the trade unionism of the communists in the '60s had posed a challenge

³¹ Interview, May 2005

³² Rasul Muhammad Abdullah: *Krishaksabhar Itihas*, p. 224

to the exploitative and despotic capitalism. In this sphere the 'ordeal' of the fighting people and their communist leaders was narrated by B. T. Ranadive:

"During the last two years or so, the Congress party has been assailing the militant democratic movement through a variety of ways. In the beginning, it used the Naxalite elements to attack and murder the cadres of the CITU and the CPI(M). Later on, it used mass raids by the police, and military combings to arrest and terrorize the people in constituencies which returned CITU and CPI(M) candidates. Simultaneously it used local goonda groups, recruited anti-social elements to murder individual leaders and intimidate the democratic movement.

The use of these goonda gangs has now reached another stage. They are recruited en masse and given police protection to attack the localities supporting the CITU and the CPI(M). They are armed, often supplied with weapons by the police and any resistance to them invites police shootings. They are allowed to loot properties, destroy belongings, burn down houses and force the residents to leave the localities so that the constituency can be free for a fake electoral success of the Congress. Thousands have to leave their places from localities like Dum Dum, Barrackpore belt and others.

Hundreds of rifles mysteriously disappear from police armoury but no explanation is forthcoming. Newspaper reports of guns snatching have often proved to be nothing but the police method of supplying guns to the gangster elements.

Here there is no semblance of a legal order. An entire locality may be attacked in broad daylight within a stone's throw from a police station. Murders are committed during day-time but no one is arrested. The same ruling party talks of rule of law, of the Supreme Court, the Constitution elsewhere. In W. Bengal, it has made the gangsters the main defenders of its Constitution. In the beginning, these gangsters were described as resistance parties of the people. But now that posture is given up. Now, however, they often call themselves *Chhatra Parishad*. The combined offensive of the CRP, the police and the goondas, and the open murders are the semi-fascist methods used by the Indira Congress Govt. in W. Bengal to suppress the

democratic and working class movement. To mislead the people in other States, the wanton attacks are represented as clashes between the Congress or its student wing and the "attacking" Marxists."³³

The CPI(M), by way of containing those difficulties, followed the same strategy as that in the agrarian field. Along with the issues related to service like job security, fixation of working hour and payment of decent salary and other financial dues, resistance to arbitrary police intervention became the focus of the labour and the service groups under both of the Central and the state governments. Industrial resistance reached its peak on the occasion of the railway strike in May 1974. It was the longest railway strike of twenty days that was launched with such demands like the fixation of 8-hour working period per day, parity of wages of the railway workers with those of workers or serviceholders in the public sector undertakings, payment of bonus and D.A., permanent employment for the casual employees, release of the trade union leaders from jail. True, it was not a communist-led strike. The strike was called and organized by the National Coordination Committee in which various anti-Congress groups assembled. When the strike was called off it produced much disgust and despair in the CPI(M) which accused not only the non-communist groups but also the 'rightist' communists (CPI) of sabotaging the people's cause.³⁴

Yet, in West Bengal the mobilization of railway labour force at this all-India strike was largely credited with the communists, particularly the CPI(M). Along with the expressions of the

³³ Ranadive B. T.: *On Terror in West Bengal*

A FOREWORD to a booklet published by the CITU West Bengal Committee in January 1972

³⁴ *Ganashakti, Amrita Bazar Patrika* (May 1974)

administrative brutality, the course of strike also saw instances of remarkable solidarity and resistance by the strikers. In Kanchrapara, Khargapur, Chittaranjan and such other places where there was a large concentration of railway workers around railway workshops and factories police not only tortured the strikers but also ravaged the rail colonies and the families of the railway employees. The striking railway employees, however, set examples of appreciable unity, perseverance and fighting spirit against an oppressive and despotic authority. Some of such instances were dramatically narrated in *Ganashakti*, the party mouthpiece of the CPI(M). Granting the possibilities of exaggeration, there still remains a basic core of truth in the way the newspaper narrated some of the major incidents of violence. A report mentioned:

“It was 12 noon. A large militia of police and B.S.F. burst upon the rail colonies of Kanchrapara. ...The entire zone was wildly raided. By making a combing operation in each quarter the police could not trace any of the employees who joined the strike. This further enraged the aggressors. They entered the houses and devastated the articles. The women too were not spared. ...But the womenfolk did not remain silent. They came out and gathered to protest against these barbarous atrocities. The police, however, did not remain silent onlookers. They rushed into the mob and made an indiscriminate beating with their staffs and rods. Four rounds of firing also took place.

As many as 25 women were injured by this monstrous attack.

...Immediately after this event, the women made a united march and seized the local police station. But the police force responded in the same manner. By their wild and indiscriminate beating a number of women succumbed to injury.

It is to be mentioned that for the last few days a gang of ruffians who were headed by Jagadish Das, the Congress M.L.A. made several attempts

to attack the rail colonies. But on each occasion the women strongly resisted them. Finally, on May 11, the gangsters threatened to give a good lesson to those women. The police raid occurred on the very next day.”³⁵

Another report of the same newspaper narrated:

“Our correspondent from Khargapur reports of a horrible police repression in the railway workshops and colonies of the region. The women were the main targets of attack. They were severely beaten and wounded by staffs and bayonets. Hurt by bayonet a boy too succumbed to death. Many others were injured.

It is also known that on May 7 the police arrested 24 railway labourers at Khargapur collie gate. Later, when a huge and long-standing rally was organized in demand of the release of these arrested labourers, the police made a virulent attack with staffs and tear gas. More than thousand people, including the mothers, sisters and wives of the railway workers, participated in the rally. 52 of the participants were arrested. Some women were seriously injured.”³⁶

The Government’s indifferent and even antagonistic attitude towards the demands of the railway workers that made them more stubborn in their protest was also noted in a report of a daily which had traditional Congress leanings:

“Hopes of an early settlement of the three-day-old railway strike faded away today with the strike leaders virtually rejecting the offer of a three-point package formula. The strike leaders including the convener of the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen’s struggle, Mr. Geroge Fernandes, urged the workers to continue the strike.

The formula envisaging simultaneous release of detained leaders of railwaymen, resumption of talks and withdrawal of the strike, was mooted to the opposition leaders during a 90-minute meeting they had with the Prime Minister and some of her colleagues this morning.

³⁵ *Ganashakti* (May 13, 1974)

³⁶ *Ibid.* May 19, 1974

The leaders did not go into the merits of the workers' demands which, they said, were for the workers to negotiate with the Government. ... This was the first time in nine months that the Prime Minister had a meeting with opposition leaders on a national issue.

The meeting having proved abortive, the Government reverted to its position that there could be no negotiation unless the strike was called off unconditionally."³⁷

While turning a deaf ear to the demand of the strikers, the Government was untiring in terrorizing them. New Delhi correspondent of *Hindustan Standard* gave an account of such terror:

"A number of families of striking railwaymen have been evicted from their quarters in railway colonies in the suburbs here. They had been given time to clear out by 8 p.m. tonight.

Some M.P.s visited some of the colonies today and said in a statement that they had come across panic-stricken families being harassed by the Central Reserve Police and others.

After visiting the Kishanganj colony, Mr. D. L. Sengupta and Mr. D. B. Thengadi, both M.P.s said: "The CRP was hunting and chasing innocent employees throughout the night. Instances of severe beating of employees as well as their wives and children have come to our notice. We saw a large number who were shamelessly beaten up and malhandled by the male police. There were very large-scale and indiscriminate arrest of employees as well as non-employees, most of whom were released at 12 to 14 kilometers away at odd hours of night.

"Water supply in half of the colony, which is managed by the railway administration, was stopped from 6 a.m. on May 8 to 8 p.m. on May 9.

"Electricity, which again is under Railway administration has been stopped in the entire colony from 6 a.m. on May 8.

"What pained us particularly was the fact that the male police heinously dealt with the womenfolk in the colony."

³⁷ *Hindustan Standard*, May 11, 1974

“At Kishanganj as well as Shakurabasti the administration has been forcing the employees to vacate their quarters throwing their families on the streets.”

“We strongly condemn the vindictive attitude of the administration.”³⁸

Though physically repressive and disruptive on the organization of the strikers, these atrocities could not break the morale of those struggling people. On the other hand, the much propagated communist programme of a broad-based class unity of the struggling masses at different layers too was tended to be implemented, as the railway workers’ issues received wide support and sympathy from the port workers, employees of the offices of the Central Government, students, teachers, and even the small peasants and agrarian workers, who jointly organized an all-India strike on May 14, 1974.³⁹

All these experiences once again set the CPI(M) politics in motion and consequently extended its base of support. The redistribution of land by detecting the illegal landholdings and the legalization of the trade union activities to secure social justice for the industrial labourers – the two main agenda of the communists, particularly the CPI(M), during the UF regimes in the ’60s created a new definition of political rule and governance. The psychological impact of this ‘popular’ rule and the image of the communists as a people’s party outshined the ‘reactionary Congress’ Government in the post-UF period. True, the severity of repression curtailed the scope of organized protest in the ’70s. But the social mobilization and sometimes even silent sufferings,

³⁸ Ibid. May 12, 1974

³⁹ *Ganashakti & Hindustan Standard*, May 1974

vibrating with the nostalgia of activism, gave birth to a political motivation that acted decisively for restoring the 'popular' democracy a few years later.

Besides, though political movement could not be organized, political teaching continued through academic programme. In the various party schools which were arranged at the district levels the ranks and supporters of the party got the opportunity to learn the tenets of socialism, to interact with the leaders about the pattern of socialism feasible in Indian national context and to enliven the socialist ideology amidst a situation when socialist politics could not be pursued in full vigour.

Nowhere was the social mobilization more apparent than in cultural activities. If organized political resistance was impossible, cultural organizations created the platform to raise the collective voice of opposition. This spirit reflected in the foundation of the *Ganatantrik Lekhak Shilpi Kalakushali Sammilani* in February 1972 in Calcutta and the proliferation of its branches at the district level.⁴⁰ In the regime of suppression the cultural life too assumed a peculiar dimension. Sarojmohun Mitra identified the main features of this culture of protest and resistance in the following manner:

a) The writers, actors and artists often made a metaphorical presentation of the situation by using allegories and translated works.

b) The anecdotes of atrocities were projected in such a way as to create a political awareness among people.

c) Cultural assemblies and programmes also provided platform for cultivating a political culture of protest.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Badyopadhyay Indranath: *Paye Paye Path Chala*

⁴¹ Mitra Sarojmohun: *Sattar Dasaker Swairatantrik Akraman O Bangla Sahityer Pratibadi Bhumika*

The CPI and the Experience of the '70s

The line of collaboration with the ruling Congress relatively saved the CPI from the backlash of terror, but the CPI, like its political counterpart, was caught by the same kind of organizational problems. The editorial of a party journal appreciated the expansion of the party's mass base in the recent past in the following terms:

“Election review reports submitted by the state councils show that in the recent election campaign tens of thousands of new militants participated on the side of the Party. A special welcome feature of this event is that large sections from agricultural workers, scheduled castes and the youth drawn from these and other sections joined our Party's campaign and enthusiastically worked for the success of the CPI candidates.”

But the editorial expressed doubt about the ability of the party to tackle and utilize those militant masses. It pointed out:

“Now the question is: what do you do with these new militants? Leave them to chance? Or make conscious and planned efforts to bring them into the party organisationally? It has often happened in the past that potential recruits – at least the bulk of them – were neglected after the campaigns and struggles were over. We are not going into the distant past. Let us remind ourselves only about what happened after the all-India land struggle (1970) and *Lok Sabha* election campaign (1971) – to mention the two outstanding political events of the recent past. If the party units had recruited the new militants into the Party the membership would have been at least about three hundred thousand.”

The editorial hence put it as a priority for the state and the district councils to work out effective plans to draw them into the party. But at the same time it warned:

“It is not enough to recruit the new militants, although that is the first task. If the gains are to be truly consolidated, the state and district councils must of necessity organise special party schools for the new members. If you neglect their political education you cannot possibly retain all of them for long. An equally important step towards organisational-political consolidation will be to ensure that new militants join a mass organisation – trade union, *khet mazdoor* union, *kisan sabha*, youth or students’ federation, women’s organisation, etc.”⁴²

Regarding popular mobilization against what the CPI(M) termed as an ‘unpopular’ rule, however, the CPI scored very little. The vision of a broad-based democratic front that haunted the CPI to search for a ‘progressive’ section of the bourgeoisie ever since the ’60s reached a point of desperation in the critical years of the mid ’70s. After the farcical victory of the Congress as a single party in the elections of ’72 the CPI’s front with the Congress became politically useless. Yet, the CPI’s support for the Congress led by Indira Gandhi on various issues seemed to have a dual purpose. At one level, it was a justification as well as a continuation of the CPI’s tradition of cooperating with the Nehruvian progressivism. At another level, it appeared to be a way of distinguishing itself from the CPI(M) brand of populism. In other words, the fundamental conflict among the communists about the way to balance between ‘militancy and constitutionalism, between populism and progressive capitalism remained as vivid in the ’70s as that had been in the ’60s. By

⁴² Recruitment of New Militants into the Party: An Urgent Task – Editor *Party Life* (May 1972), pp. 3–4

overweighing the 'progressive', however, the CPI failed to be 'popular', as the later developments showed clearly. Bishwanath Mukherjee explained the causes of this failure:

"The root of our deviation should be traced in our wrong assessment of the split of the Congress in 1969. We overestimated the significance of this event. This mistake persuaded us to take a series of wrong steps in later years.

...The leadership of our party developed a notion that the bourgeoisie had been divided qualitatively. Indira who was leading the progressive and democratic section of the bourgeoisie was fighting against its reactionary counterpart. We concluded, therefore, that by making alliance with the Indira Congress the rightist forces could be resisted and the development of the country in a leftist direction could be ensured. Such a notion tended to justify our principle of 'unity and struggle'.

Consequently in the Kochin Congress we erased the term 'blind' from our earlier guideline — 'no blind opposition to the Congress' and rewrote our programme to disapprove of all sorts of opposition to the Congress. We also decided not to join any front which did not have the Congress as a partner. We even refused to be a part of the Left Front because of its anti-Congress objective. Thus, though we raised a slogan of a left and democratic movement, we did not aspire for driving out the Congress Government."⁴³

The Congress in Doldrums

Organizationally the ruling Congress too was not in a happy position. Violation of party discipline, absence of political ethics and factional squabbles ravaged the Congress from the top-level leadership to the ordinary party ranks. The contemporary newspapers were continually reporting the gravity of the crisis generated by these factional conflicts. A note of caution was made in an editorial of *Yugantar*:

⁴³ 1978 *Salé Bhatinda Party Congresser Khasra Review Samparke Abhimat*
Collected from *Bishwanath Mukherjee. Tattwa O Sangramer Pratik*, pp. 179-180

“We are again receiving news of violence from different parts of West Bengal. During the last few months people of our state have begun to feel a sense of relief, as the suffocating atmosphere of terror and tyranny that had dismayed normal life in the state was gradually clearing. The new government came to power on the promise of building a prosperous Bengal by banishing violence. The people of West Bengal would like them to redeem their pledge. No sensible person would like to see West Bengal returning to those days of chaos and bloodshed due to narrow partisan mentality and indifference of the government.

...It is really a matter of regret that the renewal of violence in the state is often due to the inner schism of the young cadres of the Congress. Already it has taken toll of three lives in Krishnanagr and Dum Dum. How would people keep faith in a party which breaks its electoral promise of restoring law and order by setting such bad examples? The internal conflicts within the ruling party cannot be controlled by the police. It is the party leaders who have to share the responsibility. It is often alleged that the cadres of other parties have trespassed into the Youth Congress and the Chhatra Parishad. Such allegations, however, seem to be induced by the intention to expel the cadres loyal to the rival leaders. But such comments and actions will only instigate further tension and conflicts without resolving them. The situation can be changed for the better only by restoring organizational discipline and purging those unwanted persons who had so far been indulged in and patronized for narrow factional interests.”⁴⁴

Ananda Bazar Patrika too in a series of reports pointed out a number of issues of discord within the Congress. Krishnakumar Shukla and Kashikanta Moitra, the two members of the Congress Legislative Party who were alleged to have criticized the Chief Minister for police atrocities in the state and the Government's inaction to it were accused of showing disloyalty to the Party High Command. But the attempt to take

⁴⁴ *Yugantar* (June 21, 1972)

disciplinary actions against these two persons was equally vehemently protested by another faction within the party. The report said:

“The ‘emergency meeting’ of the Congress Legislative Party on Friday was virtually spoilt by the chaos and commotion. This meeting was convened primarily ‘to criticize the conduct’ of Krishnakumar Shukla and Kashikanta Moitra and to express ‘full confidence’ in the Chief Minister (Siddhartha Shankar Roy). But none of these purposes was served. On the contrary, some of the M.L.A.s who were supposed to be loyal to the Chief Minister have been heckled. Secondly, the actions of the state police have been severely criticized and it has been decided to convene another meeting of the Legislative Party immediately to discuss specifically the excesses done by the police.

The Chief Minister was deliberately absent in this meeting. Shouting and turmoil went to such an extent that the pigeons who had built up their nests in the Assembly House left the place in fear, and the security persons and the drivers of the ministers and the M.L.A.s rushed into the place. The meeting was presided over by Abdus Sattar, the deputy leader of the party.

...Amidst this confusion and uproar, the proposal against Shukla and Moitra could not be raised at all. Feeling the mood of the meeting Mr. Sattar did not make any attempt to do so. Rather, he had to promise to convene another meeting to discuss only the issue of police actions. The motion to repose ‘full confidence’ in the Chief Minister too was abandoned in the same way. When the meeting was virtually spoilt Mr. Sattar was heard shouting that they had full confidence in the Chief Minister.”⁴⁵

The internal schism within the Congress once again came to surface on the issue of strike called by *Chhatra Parishad* and Youth Congress. The strike was called on June 5, 1975 in order to compel the Government to implement immediately its development programme. The call of such a strike against the

⁴⁵ *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (April 12, 1975)

ruling party by the two of its constituents was a clear indication of the lack of confidence in the party line by some of the factions within the party. The aggressive tone of this voice of dissidence was heard was reported in the newspaper:

“The state unit of the Congress Party is facing a complicated and critical situation on the issue of the strike and movement for development called by the *Chhatra Parishad* and the Youth Congress. So far the dissension over this issue was limited to inner party discussions and the conflicting statements in newspapers. But since Friday, both parties have openly challenged each other. On this day, one group has started to mobilize its cadres to make this strike and movement a success. The rival faction is doing the same thing to resist it.

On this day, both parties gave a call to their loyal cadres in the state to start action without delay. In greater Calcutta, many secret meetings too have taken place on this issue.”⁴⁶

Finally an adjustment was made and the strike was withdrawn. But this could not clear up the bitterness and misunderstanding that continued to affect the party’s unity and integrity.⁴⁷

The inner party crisis was not confined to the state level only. Party supremo Indira Gandhi too was not immune from bitter criticism and conspiratorial blows. Ever since Mrs. Gandhi’s accession to Prime Ministership in 1966 she faced a formidable opposition in the Congress Party. She was cornered and overridden in the party’s organization. A series of events in national politics, however, tilted the balance of power in favour of Mrs. Gandhi. The defeat of Morarji Desai in the Congress

⁴⁶ *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (May 24, 1975)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* May 1975

Parliamentary Party in 1967; the victory of V. V. Giri who was Indira's man of choice in the Presidential election against the official Congress nominee Sanjiva Reddy; the triumph of Mrs. Gandhi in the *Lok Sabha* election in 1971; the glorious role of India in the War of Bangladesh under Mrs. Gandhi's Prime Ministership made her unquestionably the preeminent leader of the country. This preeminence in national politics also enabled Mrs. Gandhi to establish control over the party.

But, the strategy through which Indira Gandhi had achieved this dominance created a lot of complications. Both as the Prime Minister as well as the Party leader she was frequently accused of exercising excessive authoritarianism and highly personalized rule. In governance it meant extreme centralization. In political organization it meant assertion of state executive power over party's organization. Mrs. Gandhi was later indicted with the charge of removing almost all the office-bearers in the party as well as in the Government who were suspected to have an independent base and replaced all of them by men personally loyal to her. Instead of democratic procedures her personal discretion reigned supreme in the Congress and the government. But the opposition and criticism could not be silenced. In Uttar Pradesh the crisis of Chief Minister Bahuguna's government created by a group of dissidents within the Congress Party signaled a crisis for Indira's rule. Similarly, the intense factional strife among the Congressmen over the issue of nominating the party candidates during the Assembly Election in Gujarat and the consequent defeat of the Congress in the election exposed the vulnerability of Indira's position within her party.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 1975

Outside the party too Indira Gandhi's position was increasingly threatened by popular grievances against food shortage, price rise, hooliganism, breakdown of law and order, corruption and malpractices. No wonder, the opposition parties took full advantage of the situation. Agitation and discontent that marked the public life all over India were consolidated into a political challenge by Jayprakash Narayan's countrywide call to replace the 'illegitimate immoral' rule of Mrs. Gandhi by a moral authority through a 'social revolution'. The leftists, particularly the CPI(M), readily responded to the call. Though the CPI(M)'s programme of 'people's revolution' was ideologically different from Jayprakash Narayan's scheme of 'social revolution', they could make a common cause against the corrupt and atrocious Congress regime. West Bengal with its long-standing anti-Congress political tradition provided a ready platform for this coalition politics. During Jayprakash Narayan's visit to West Bengal in the first week of June 1975 that induced remarkable popular response the leftists enthusiastically took up his cause and made an endorsement of their anti-Congress resolution. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in one of its reports described:

"Mr. Narayan made a survey of the situation now prevailing in the country and contended that corruption at all levels of the administration and the Government had vitiated the atmosphere beyond redemption creating in its wake abject poverty, unemployment and other social evils.

...Mr. Narayan alleged that the Prime Minister of India had managed to concentrate all powers in her hands which would ultimately lead her to follow a path of dictatorship."

As a remedy, the report continued that

"Mr. Jayprakash Narayan told ...that mere replacement of the Government by election would not bring about the desired change in the

society. What was needed, he said, was to develop a continuous struggle of the people aiming at a total revolution for a total change in the socio-economic set-up in the country.

...He said that separate struggles of working class, peasants, teachers students and youths would have to be interwoven into a mighty people's struggle to face this challenge. Otherwise, he thought, capitalists and their henchmen could not be defeated."⁴⁹

The CPI with its thinly veiled sympathy for the Congress refrained from joining Jayprakash's camp and also criticized the CPI(M) for supporting Jayprakash's 'vague' idea of social revolution.⁵⁰ No doubt, a truly Marxist approach did not match with this *sarvodaya* programme of social revolution. Yet, the principle of a united struggle, the zeal to fight against a corrupt government struck a perfect chord with the CPI(M)'s electoral strategy of establishing a beneficent government. Not unnaturally, the CPI(M)'s anti-Congress popular tradition provided a ready audience to Jayprakash Narayan's call. Jyoti Basu explained this network:

"At that critical juncture a remarkable role was played by Jayprakash Narayan. The way he took up the responsibility to translate the swelling discontent of the people into an organized resistance and rendered his leadership to restore the lost democracy in the country demands appreciation. The growing autocratic mood of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made him anxious about the future of our country. Long before the declaration of the Emergency he launched a campaign to make people aware of the imminent danger. He was assaulted as well as imprisoned by the Congress hooligans and the Congress government itself. Yet, he was indomitable. In Calcutta too he was attacked before the Emergency regime. ...At that period we arranged a large meeting at Brigade with him. Later a huge procession

⁴⁹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (June 5, 1975)

⁵⁰ *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (June 1975)

accompanied him from the south to the north of the city. This spontaneous reaction and struggling spirit of the people of Calcutta as well as of West Bengal as a whole enchanted Jayprakash Narayan who admitted that throughout his campaign all over the country he never met such a response before.”⁵¹

In other words, by the middle of 1975 a countrywide political mobilization with an anti-Congress orientation was made and in West Bengal the leftists solidly contributed to it.

The Emergency: A Tyrannical Assertion of Democracy

Amidst these developments the constitutional validity of Mrs. Gandhi's regime was questioned by a verdict of the Allahabad High Court in June 1975 that found Mrs. Gandhi's election in 1971 invalid on the grounds of corrupt practices. This verdict also debarred Mrs. Gandhi from competing in any election for six years. This triggered the crisis. Mrs. Gandhi moved to put a decisive end to the concerted opposition to her rule. At her initiative, an internal Emergency was declared by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad on June 26, 1975 under Article 352 of the Constitution on account of the threat to the security of the country due to 'internal disturbances'.⁵²

⁵¹ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, p. 200

⁵² *Hindustan Standard*, June 1975

The Constitution of India provides for three different kinds of 'emergencies' or abnormal situations which call for a departure from the normal governmental machinery set up by the Constitution: i) An emergency due to war, external aggression or armed rebellion (Article 352) ii) Failure of constitutional machinery in the states (Article 356) iii) Financial emergency (Article 360). In 1975, an emergency was declared under Article 352 on the ground of the total discomfiture of the constitutional machinery in the face of the growing threat by the disruptive forces all over the country. (Basu Durgadas: *Introduction to the Constitution of India*)

Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in a text explained the nature of such 'internal disturbances':

"I am sure you are all conscious of the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India. In the name of democracy it has been sought to negate the very functioning of democracy. Duly elected Governments have not been allowed to function and in some cases force has been used to compel themselves to resign in order to dissolve lawfully elected assemblies. Agitations have surcharged the atmosphere, leading to violent incidents. The whole country was shocked at the brutal murder of my Cabinet colleague Mr. I. N. Mishra. We also deeply deplore at the dastardly attack on the Chief Justice of India.

Certain persons have been called upon the armed forces to mutiny and our police to rebel. The fact that our defence forces and the police are disciplined and deeply patriotic and therefore will not be taken in, does not mitigate the seriousness of provocation

All manner of false allegations have been hurled at me. ... This is not a personal matter. It is not important whether I remain Prime Minister or not. However, the institution of Prime Minister is important and the deliberate political attempt to denigrate it is not in the interest of democracy or of the nation. ... Any situation which weakens the capacity of the national Government to act decisively inside the country is bound to encourage dangers from outside. It is our paramount duty to safeguard unity and stability. The nation's integrity demands firm action.

... The threat to internal stability also affects production and prospects of economic development. In the last few months the determined action we have taken has succeeded in largely checking price rise. We have been actively considering further measures to strengthen the economy and to relieve the hardship of various section, including the poor and vulnerable and those with fixed incomes..."⁵³

In other words, the curtailment of certain democratic rights that the Internal Emergency actually meant was justified in the name of protecting democracy in India. But whatever might be

⁵³ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (June 27, 1975)

the objective, the visible effect of the Emergency was counted by all the opposition parties as a severe assault on civil rights. The Parliamentary elections scheduled for March 1976 were postponed and the terms of both the Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies were extended. A sweeping reform of electoral laws was made to enable Mrs. Gandhi to legitimize her electoral victory. A dictatorial rule crippled political opposition all over India. The mechanism of arbitrary, arrogant and capricious power was legitimized in the name of the people and democracy.

Reaction of the Communists

The communists were particularly vulnerable to this 'reign of terror'. Though the communist opposition alone did not induce the Emergency, the fear-psychosis of the ruling class did not spare this chronically dangerous political factor. Naxalites were mainly targeted. They were thrown into prison and brutally treated. For the parliamentary wings of the Communist Party too the situation was no less serious. Trade unions were virtually dismantled. Press censorship drastically curtailed the voice of opposition. Indiscriminate use of the MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) endangered the civil life. The ill-famed 42nd Amendment of the Constitution⁵⁴ too was passed during this period. Jyoti Basu gave an account of this 'dark' regime:

⁵⁴ Under Article 352 a proclamation of emergency may be made by the President at any time he considers that the security of the country or any part of it has been threatened by war, external aggression or armed rebellion. The 42nd Amendment (1976) added that such proclamation may be made even before the actual occurrence of such disturbance, if any such disturbance is apprehended by the President and his apprehension is shared by the Prime Minister or the Union Minister of Cabinet rank. (Basu Durgadas: *Introduction to the Constitution of India*)

“To combat the growing crisis and the outburst of popular discontent on the one hand, and the lack of confidence within the party on the other hand, and finally to fulfil her own craze for autocratic power Indira Gandhi had recourse to a measure which was typical of tyrants and power-hungry statesmen in all countries and in all times. The more her position in power was becoming endangered, the more she wanted to grasp it desperately. She could not solve this problem and consolidate her position through welfare measures, because these were against the class interests of her party. So, she resorted to the policy of snatching the rights of people and declared the Emergency on June 26, 1975. Authoritarianism consolidated its place in Indian democracy.”⁵⁵

The scourge of terror not only fell upon the political cadres of the opposition parties and their ideologues but tended to silence all sorts of criticism. Gaurkishore Ghosh who was a hardcore critic of leftist radicalism and romantic socialism of Jayprakash Narayan could not avoid persecution. A journalist and writer by profession he had never been tired of expressing antipathy about the leftist scheme of radical or revolutionary politics. Once he wrote:

“During the UF regime the leaders of the ruling establishment make an evil nexus with the hooligans. The leftist leaders had a design to create chaos in the state and destabilize the society by instigating the unruly lumpens. In this way they hoped to create the objective conditions or revolution about which they had only a theoretical notion. They applied this theoretical knowledge to demolish our education, culture and national consciousness. The attempt was to some extent successful.”⁵⁶

On another occasion he wrote:

“It does not at all sound convincing to me that the mere removal of Indira from power at any cost would strengthen democracy. Please do not

⁵⁵ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 196-198

⁵⁶ Atmaghati Mughal (The Suiciding Mughal), Collected from Ghosh Gaurkishore: *Amake Balte Dao (Let Me Speak)*, Kolkata, 1977, p. 79

misunderstand me. In my opinion, if the removal of Indira is intended to consolidate the democracy then it must be preceded with the foundation of those institutions in our national life that are essential to sustain democracy. It is an arduous as well as a lengthy process.”⁵⁷

His faith in the Congress as the exponent of a constructive ideology and institution was no less apparent. He wrote:

“But what about the Congress? It does not dwell upon the negative principle of destruction. They came to power with a constructive promise.”

But even this person could not conceal his sense of frustration at the current performance of the Congress Party and its mentors. He, therefore, raised the question:

“Then why do the young leaders of that party are taking such a destructive posture through ruthless application of force and virulent attack on education and culture?”⁵⁸

This anti-authoritarianism of a conscious citizen sounded no less dangerous than the anti-Congressism of the leftist political activists to the tyrannical government of Indira Gandhi and its representatives in the state, who soon put the writer into detention. During imprisonment he had a dreadful experience of repression as he narrated:

“The Presidential order or the majority decision of the Parliament either of which was instigated by power-hungry Indira Gandhi has robbed off the rights and freedom of the ordinary citizens. The Constitution has been martyred. The Supreme Court has been castrated. Suppression and oppression are the active ruling principles. The edifice of Mrs Gandhi’s

⁵⁷ Jayprakash Anandolan Samparke Amar Bichchhinna Bhavna (My Opinions Regarding The Movement of Jayprakash), Samatat, March, 1975
Collected from Ghosh Gaurkishore. *Amake Balte Dao*, p. 83

⁵⁸ Atmaghati Mughal, p. 79

Collected from Ghosh Gaurkishore: *Amake Balte Dao*, p 100

regime is reared not on the spontaneous support of the people but on the rampant use of the MISA and the vigilance of the secret police. Nowhere is the disastrous effect of the indiscriminate use of the MISA is more visible than in the prison house. I am stunned at the innumerable examples of 5 years' or 7 years' imprisonment without trial. Such horrible disgrace of humanity is unprecedented."⁵⁹

Barun Sengupta, a journalist who had a rightist leaning in political ideology, too could not approve this autocratic exercise of power. He found in this blatant massacre of democratic virtues a desperate bid of Indira Gandhi to retain power. Sengupta argued that the fall of the Congress Government in many states and the marginal victory of the Congress in the centre in the Assembly and Parliamentary elections of 1967 signalled danger for the Congress Party in the democratic matrix of the Indian politics. The skilful projection of a nationalist cause during the Bangladesh War in 1971 and a populist cause through the slogan of eradication of poverty helped Indira Gandhi and her youth Congress to take the rein of popular imagination. With a sharp tone of criticism, however, Sengupta mentioned that by the middle of the '90s promises proved to be a great hoax. Disenchantment of the masses reached its height. Popular discontent became a political threat when Jayprakash Narayan began mobilizing the non-Congress opinions and organizations throughout the country for electoral coalition. From a journalistic perception Sengupta then commented:

"Henceforth the Congress and Indira had no way of retaining power through democratic means. The successful progression of Jayprakash's campaign in unifying the opposition forces made the collapse of the Congress in the election of 1976 inevitable.

⁵⁹ Dasatwa Nay, Dasatwa Nay, Swadhinata (No Slavery, Freedom); written in Presidency Jail, Cell No 10, Republic Day (26 January), 1976
Collected from Ghosh Gaurkushore : *Amake Balte Dao*, p. 100

...There was only one escape-route. Nothing but the postponment of election could ensure the continuation of Indira's and Congress rule. And the only legal means for the postponment of election was to declare the internal Emergency and extend the term of the Parliament for one year in that excuse.

I am convinced that even without the judgement of Allahabad Court Indira Gandhi would have recourse to this action. She would have to avoid the election at any cost. That is why long before the court's verdict Indira started designing with the Chief Ministers of an autocratic framework of power in complete disregard of the Constitution. The Chief Ministers readily supported the scheme.”⁶⁰

Apart from the threat of political suppression the communists also faced an ideological challenge. The two Communist Parties had justified their participation in electoral politics as a strategy to use the parliamentary instruments for ensuring some immediate relief to the people. In other words, though revolution was still considered as the ultimate solution to the problems of exploitation and oppression, some degree of faith was also attached to the parliamentary mechanism. But the declaration of the Emergency raised questions about the viability of this optimism. The blatant denial of civil rights and the extreme authoritarianism which marked the regime of the Emergency were practised in a democratic framework and under constitutional provision. Theoretically the Emergency was proclaimed to restore discipline and order in the country. Also the political and administrative extremities were justified in the name of implementing an economic reform for the benefit of the poor and the landless. But the assertion of despotism and

⁶⁰ Sengupta Barun: *Indira Ekadashi* (Eleven Years under Indira)

Collected from *Barun Sengupta Rachana Sangraha* (Collected Works), Kolkata, September 2007, p. 576

the institutionalization of some of the despotic features through laws and constitutional amendments obscured the spirit of social justice. So, the constitution, however grossly misused, ratified the whole process. Naturally the idea of relying on such a democracy which contained the seeds of an undemocratic rule tended to weaken the legitimacy of the position that the members of the Communist Parties had taken on parliamentary democracy.

The Communist Parties, therefore, were put in a test of merit to form an alternative to the fascist terror. But both parties were found frustratingly defunct. The CPI continued the line of collaboration with the Congress. In defence of the Emergency the CPI provided the following argument:

“The declaration of emergency was necessary and justified precisely because of its resolute and uncompromising stand in defence of democracy. There is absolutely no trace of opportunism or of logical contradiction in its stand. Democracy in India needed the emergency.

...Because the most reactionary, pro-imperialist and anti-democratic forces were preparing for a campaign of arson and terror in the nation's capital that would have brought them to power.

...Moreover, it is not only from the standpoint of it being a necessary and justified preemptive blow against the right and fascist forces that the CPI supports the emergency, very important though that is. It also supports it from the standpoint of building and developing the unity of all patriotic, democratic and left forces. At the present phase of the development of the revolutionary process in India such unity has to be directed against the offensive of counterrevolution directed at short circuiting, deflecting and forestalling the advance and deepening of this process.

...the emergency needs to be seen not as a formal act but as a part of events which have built up towards it and as a vantage point for further influencing developments in a direction advantageous to our country, people and class.”

The CPI was, however, aware of the possible misdeeds and excess done during such period. It provided some suggestions to mitigate those evil effects. It was also optimistic about the role of the Congress Government to identify and rectify those misdeeds of the Emergency. The article continues:

“Are there no dangers in the emergency period of reactionary and corrupt sections of the bureaucracy and other parts of the state apparatus misusing it? There are such dangers and the CPI has drawn attention to them. These dangers cannot be fought by either opposing the emergency or adopting a neutral attitude. It can only be fought by ever-extending popular participation at different levels and institutionalised in popular committees with statutory powers. It is of great importance in this connection to remember that the latest resolution of the Congress working committee has also drawn attention to the need for such popular participation. The Congress leadership has called for the cooperation of likeminded parties as well.”⁶¹

In other words, the faith in the progressive section of the bourgeoisie and their government was still sustained.

However, even within the CPI a group of leaders, particularly of the provincial committee was not totally uncritical of the Emergency measures of the Central Government. Bhupesh Gupta, in an assessment of the Emergency remarked:

“Our knowledge and experience since the declaration of the Emergency have clearly proved the justification of this measure. But at the same time, the misuse of power and other shortcomings of this regime too cannot be denied.

...For example, there is no concrete programme for the socialization of the urban areas and the land potential for urbanization. Also no ceiling was set on the ownership and occupancy of the fallow land.

⁶¹ Sen Mohit: *Emergency and Democracy*-written in answer to a question asked by a reader of the CPI publication called *Party Life* (July 1975), pp. 14-16

...The task for the formation of the popular committees at all levels to implement the 20 points programme too has not yet been undertaken.'

The monopoly capitalists in states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharastra are fully exploiting the Emergency situation to carry on retrenchment, lay-off, closure and all such exploitative measures.

...After the completion of the hundred days of the Emergency our authority should also be sensitive to the issue of harmful effect of curtailing the freedom of individual and democratic rights.

...It is a silly concept that to fight against fascism the anti-fascist forces should be stifled."⁶²

A group of the state wing of the party led by Bishwanath Mukherjee was more vocal and even desired to ally with the CPI(M).⁶³ The attempt did not become successful because neither the State Committee nor the Central Committee approved of the proposal. But the voice of dissent could not be silenced altogether. Rather below the levels of official resolutions and policy announcements the CPI left lines were making a whole lot of "psychological adjustments for the revival of a combined left opposition" in West Bengal.⁶⁴ There were also occasions of large scale resignation of the CPI members from the party in West Bengal and Bihar against the 'capitalization line' and for the continuation of 'fighting in the mass fronts in the interest of the people'.⁶⁵

The CPI(ML) which claimed to represent the 'radical' face of communism in the state registered its complete disapproval of this democratic scheme of killing democracy. The '70s was a

⁶² Gupta Bhupesh. *Jaruri Abasthar Eksho Din Kalantar* (Weekly) (October 25, 1975)

⁶³ *Hindustan Standard* (November 1976)

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* (September 14, 1976)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (July 29, 1976)

phase of discomfiture for the naxalites. The CPI(ML) which never had a condensed party organization further pulverized through clash of opinions. The top and rank of the party was virtually wiped out by internecine conflicts, police persecution and alleged hooliganism of the Congress Party. Amidst this benign picture, however, the resilience of the naxalite ideology and activities was not totally ruined. Shaibal Mitra who played a front-ranking role in the heyday of the naxalite movement in the late '60s took up a new initiative for mobilization. He explained the mood of this period:

“Although the naxalite movement faced utter discomfiture after '72, some small sects still existed hither and tither. Some old programmes and slogans like ‘annihilation of class enemies’, ‘China’s Chairman is our Chairman’ had been discarded. True, these groups were consolidated neither organizationally nor ideologically. Besides, the politics of violence of the preceeding years left a languishing effect on the psyche of the surviving cadres. Nevertheless, all did not become quiet on the naxalite front. Heated debates were going on the formulation of the future programme. The student groups played the leading role here. The students, however, were not isolated atoms but integral parts of their families and thereby the larger society. So the martyrs of the older days and the cadres of the present day became active agents for dissemination of their ideas among their family members many of whom either directly or indirectly became parts of this political process. My mother, while participating in a procession near Esplanade, was resisted by the police and a photograph was published on the newspapers on the next day. The students of Jadavpur University made an anthology of the experiences of the relatives of the naxalite martyrs. All these aroused a popular consciousness.”

This psychological mobilization acquired a political dimension when the naxalites joined hands with the other forces fighting for democracy. Shaibal Mitra continued:

“Jayprakash Narayan played a significant role during this phase. We started collaborating with him to make a collective resistance. The other left groups were then suspicious about him. He was even suspected as the

agent of the CIA. The scenario changed only after the declaration of the Emergency. But we did not hesitate to consider him as a friend from the beginning. Actually, as dislocated and disrupted as we were, we did not have the compulsion to assemble under a political banner. Nevertheless, the urge for change still haunted us. We even sought our inspiration and legitimacy from such historical experiences as China's journey towards a progressive change under the leadership of San Yat Sen."⁶⁶

True, this mobilization could not concretize as the CPI(ML) failed to appear as an electoral force. But the long shadow of a fractured dream, nightmare of ruthless state machinery created in popular psyche a determination of change. The CPI(ML) organizationally could not provide an alternative to fulfil that aspiration. But the politics of change set in.

The CPI(M) was unequivocally critical of the Emergency. A. K. Gopalan on the floor of the Parliament in July 1975 condemned the Emergency:

"On behalf of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), I totally oppose the new declaration of Emergency and its ratification in this house.... We cannot betray the interests of the people, give our assent to the obliteration of all vestiges of democracy in India – freedom of the person, freedom of speech, freedom to form associations, freedom to approach the courts, freedom of the press, freedom to criticise the Government and work for its replacement by a Government of the people's choice.

...It is unfortunate that Communist Party of Soviet Union and some other Communist Parties have allowed themselves to be misled by the façade of attack against right action and do not see that the real thrust of these measures is against the people fighting for a better existence. They do not see that because of the basic policies of the Govt. the contradictions between the Govt. and the people are intensifying. The CPI, the wretched traitors to the working class and the toiling people, continues to function as Her Majesty's loyal opposition. Our party considers it as its foremost task to

⁶⁶ Interview, April 2008

awaken and organise the people against the grave peril they are facing and throw them into the struggle for the withdrawal of the Emergency and restoration of whatever democratic rights they wrenched after innumerable struggles and untold sacrifices, for the resignation of Smt. Indira Gandhi from Prime Ministership and for the release of all political prisoners.”⁶⁷

The leaders at the state level also followed suit. Jyoti Basu in a C.I.T.U. conference situated the ‘reactionary’ measures of the government at the perspective of class struggle:

“This onslaught on democracy, however, can be explained in a particular socio-economic perspective. The ruling party has failed to tackle the intensifying crisis and the economic depression. Though the ministers and the bureaucrats are denying this, its invariable signs are manifested in lay-off, closure of factories and other institutions. The severe fall in the price of commercial crops has endangered the small peasants. Along with these, the government has failed to control the rising prices of the essential commodities. In this situation the government applied a vigorous policy to combat the outburst of popular discontent and growing mass resistance so that the burden of crisis can be successfully shifted upon the common people.”

Mr Basu also related the steps of the bourgeois government in Indian state with the general developments in all the Third World states where the bourgeoisie had captured power after decolonization:

“We also noticed that in Bangladesh Mujibur Rahman has already brought the constitutional rule to an end and has established single party dictatorship. He has also commented on the inability of the bourgeois rulers in the newly liberated states to sustain constitutional democracy for long. Our historical experience has shown that the bourgeoisie who had led the movement for decolonization have failed to complete the democratic

⁶⁷ Basu Sajal ed.: *Underground Literature during Indian Emergency*

revolution in the period after independence, tended to make alliance with the landlords and compromised with the imperialist forces. In consequence, the economic basis of bourgeoisie development has remained weak in those countries. In a country like India too which was comparatively progressive among the underdeveloped countries the bourgeoisie found it impossible to continue with their class rule in the structure of constitutional democracy. The declaration of the Emergency on June 26 had once again proved this point."

In the same speech in the conference of the working committee of the CITU in Madras Jyoti Basu gave a call for popular action to end an unpopular regime:

"It is obvious that if the working class and the trade union movements do not try their utmost to protect the democratic rights and to resist this brutal onslaught, our country will be doomed to a dark future. If the working class remains inactive or becomes unsuccessful in its struggle, it would be totally enslaved by the capitalists and would be exposed to severe exploitation. So, it is high time that they should play a vanguard role and apply the best of their organizational strength to protect the peasants, agricultural labourers, serviceholders and the masses in general from ruination. Otherwise, democracy would cease to exist in our country, trade union movement too would come to an end."⁶⁸

Though politically critical, organizationally however, the CPI(M) could not face the situation adroitly. Actually for the CPI(M) the Emergency came as a great shock. A CPI note commented on the confusing condition of the CPI(M):

"The confusion inside the CPM has increased with the emergency. The CPM was not able to adopt any stand on the emergency because of sharp differences among their all-India and state leaderships. They have

⁶⁸ Basu Jyoti: *Jaruri Abasthar Chhamase Ja Hayeche* (What Has Happened During The Emergency) -The Inaugural Speech at the Conference of the Working Committee of the C.I.T.U. in Madras on November 10, 1975
Collected from *Jyoti Basu Nirbachita Rachana Sangraha (Dwitiya Khanda)*, pp. 250-252

now come down from the position of no-flag to no-political resolution. It is possible to wean away the CPM or at least sections of it if a fraternal political approach is made at all levels. They can be drawn into mass movements for implementation of the economic programme.”⁶⁹

The CPI's ambition to win over the cadres of the CPI(M) was perhaps a boastful proposition. There is no doubt, however, that neither the political planning nor the organizational strength of the party permitted it to combat the forces of reaction. As a result, when the mechanism of oppression became active in full swing the party was bewildered. Though the Central Committee directed the State Committee to organize underground party cells, no solid and sustained political initiative could be seen. Indeed, the Emergency marked one and a half years of silence of the CPI (M) leaders who did not produce any document of political significance and concentrated mainly on cultural activities. Saroj Chakravarti who was the Personal Assistant of the Chief Ministers of West Bengal also noted in his memoirs the unprepared condition of the CPI(M) to face the Emergency:

“Many amusing reports reached us from police sources about the attitude of opposition parties particularly of the CPI(M) on Emergency. One such report came from a highup. (I keep his name under cover.) I quote what he stated in his report to the Chief Minister: “Its (CPIM's) attitude towards Emergency from the very beginning was mixed. There was a strong view that after all, both Morarji Desai and Jaiprakash Narayan on the one side belonged to the right reactionary, as did Indira Gandhi on the other side. ‘Let then the right reactionaries fight amongst each other and let us wait and see’.” This, more or less, was the view of the group. The other view has been that the right reactionary Government might take this opportunity of Emergency to swing out against the CPI(M) as a party.

⁶⁹ Rao C. Rajeshwar, Gupta Bhupesh, Sen Mohit: *Emergency and the Communist Party* (Communist Party Publication, 1975)

This State took note of the mixed feelings of this party and the lack of any plan on their part to take active steps against the Emergency. Therefore, this State did not take action against the aging leadership of the State cadre but took limited action against the ground level activists only as prophylactic measure and insurance against the future.... Continuing the report said, "The CPI(M) are publishing recently bulletins which are entirely against the Emergency provision.... The indifference noted right at the beginning of Emergency is no longer there. The problem is (I am afraid) the lack of guidelines from the Government of India. In West Bengal we cannot play with this party. By our firm and determined policy we have considerably cut down its political effectiveness. This has been proved by the last two general strikes called by these parties. If, however, this party goes underground then the impulsion of the party to go extremism will be very strong."⁷⁰

Indeed, the only way to save the party's organization from the onslaught of oppression was to carry on underground activities. But the maintenance of underground organization required strict discipline, careful handling of funds and some other skill which the party had substantially lost during the prolonged experiment in constitutional politics. So, the CPI(M) could not score well in carrying on underground mobilization. A newspaper report suggested that the internal dissensions that had been making headway at the various layers of party membership since the early '70s heightened. The leadership apparently resorted to merciless purging to silence all sorts of criticism. It dissolved the local Ballygunge committee and only two of the 26 Calcutta and suburban local committees did not have changes made in them. These were the Central Calcutta and Taltola local committees. In the remaining 24 committees a large number of second ranking leaders had either been

⁷⁰ Chakrabarti Saroj: *With West Bengal Chief Ministers – Memoirs 1962 to 1977*, p. 483

suspended or been expelled on the ostensible charges of breach of discipline or immorality. The party membership had largely fallen. The situation worsened so much that the party was said to have appointed representatives to contact those against whom the disciplinary actions had already been taken. These people had been asked to reapply for party membership repenting of their earlier errors.⁷¹

Under such conditions the CPI(M)'s struggle against a tyrannical regime could not assume any organized political character but was continued with the same tone of social and cultural mobilization that the party had exercised since the early '70s. The Provincial Committee of *Krishak Sabha* adopted a new strategy to survive in this reign of terror. Instead of organizing a large scale political movement on agrarian front, it instructed its activists to mobilize people for local protest on immediate economic demands like the increase of wages of agrarian workers, fair price of agrarian products, stoppage of eviction, reduction of rent, distribution of surplus land, irrigation facilities, decrease in the price of essential commodities, etc. By holding small but regular meetings and by continually recruiting new members most of which were accomplished in informal ways, the *Krishak Sabha* kept itself up as an active organization in rural society.⁷²

Haradhan Ray in his reminiscences recorded his experience of organizing a long-standing trade union movement in the colliery, paper mills and other factories of Raniganj and Asansol

⁷¹ *Hindustan Standard* (November 16, 1976)

⁷² Bhattacharya Jayanta: *Pashchimanga: Jamir Andolan O Bhumi Sanskar* Shital Goswami was a youth Congress leader of the locality.

before and during the Emergency. In his narrative he mentioned a few tactics through which the party activists maintained their network and induced people to actions of resistance even in the face of severe oppression:

“At that time, Bikash Chaudhuri and myself were assigned to maintain contacts with different centres. We did these works at night. We spread our network across the river. This task was usually done by Bikash. I occasionally participated in it. The person who helped us a lot was Phanibhusan Mondal who had originally been a leader at the party’s student forum and later became associated with the youth movement and the transport workers’s movement.

Even when his relations with the party were severed, he gave his information at every night regardless of the heat of summer, the rains or the cold of the winter. He never failed in rendering this service. Comrade Rabin Sen and myself eagerly waited for the informations he brought.

In 1974, Shital Goswami organized a team of jail-birds and experienced criminals at Ballabhpur (near Raniganj), and launched a regime of terror indiscriminately assaulting men and women, the old and the young. At this critical moment one of our lady activists Rani Chatterjee played a glorious role. She mobilized the women of the locality, who with choppers, sticks and all such domestic tools made a formidable resistance. This also bolstered up the morale of the menfolk. Henceforth, all attacks of the hooligans were successfully faced by the women resistance group. On one morning in 1974, Comrade Rabin Sen and myself went to J. K. Nagar (a paper-mill at Raniganj) to organize a meeting. Then the mill was under lock-out. By 10 a.m. we heard that an untoward incident has occurred at Ballabhpur. The chief of a group of rowdies who was brought by Shital Goswami to launch an ‘action’ has been murdered. In this counter-attack the women were accompanied by men. This came as a turning point. The workers regained their spirit and confidence.”⁷³

⁷³ Ray Haradhan: *Agnigarbha Dinguli*, pp. 115-116
Shital Goswami was a youth Congress leader of the locality

Sadhan Chattopadhyay and some of his friends, who published a journal named *Lekha O Rekha*, refused to be harassed by the rule of censorship. Consequently, they voluntarily decided to stop the publication. This was, according to Chattopadhyay, “a symbolic act and even a matter of inaction, nevertheless an incident of positive impact on popular psyche”.⁷⁴

Such actions as well as conscious withdrawal from actions surreptitiously but decisively played a role in legitimizing a people's party in people's eyes.

The Elections of '77: Reassertion of Democracy

The Elections of 1977 was declared in this perspective. While in November 1976 Indira Gandhi got a parliamentary sanction to postpone elections by one year, within two months she reverted her decision and in January 1977 made an announcement to hold *Lok Sabha* Elections in March. The announcement of election itself was propagated as a democratic feature of the Indira Government by the Congress in its electoral campaign. It was upheld as an expression of the willingness of Mrs. Gandhi to restore the democratic fabric of the nation. The leftist opposition, however, had a different explanation. On the one hand, the leftists hailed it as a victory of the democratic forces whose inexorable spirit bent even the most tyrannical regime to grant some concessions to the people. On the other hand, they suspected the electoral venture as an attempt by the Congress to legitimize some of its reactionary measures undertaken during the Emergency through constitutional means. After the experience of the Elections of '72 they were

⁷⁴ Interview

particularly sceptical about a fair and impartial election in a situation of tyranny and repression.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the election gave an opportunity to the popular forces to reward and punish the political parties for their virtues and vices.

In the *Lok Sabha* elections the CPI firmly rejected the idea of electoral understanding with the Janata Party⁷⁶ and made conditional adjustments with the Congress. Its 'principled electoral stand', as it had been explained in a party journal, was that of "supporting progressive and democratic forces wherever they are positioned and of opposing reactionary forces wherever these are positioned, either inside or outside the ruling party". According to this principle, the CPI found in the Janata Party and its political network with the Akali Dal, the DMK, the Jana Sangh and the RSS "the old grand alliance of right-reaction in a new garb" and, therefore, any electoral understanding with this party was considered impossible. As far as the Congress Party was concerned, understanding was made "in those states where political conditions for such adjustment or understanding exist – which means precisely those states like West Bengal, Kerala and Tamilnadu where the state Congress leadership is democratic and has, together with the Congress rank and file masses, stood with our party and our masses in common struggle against reactionary and disruptive

⁷⁵ Basu Jyoti: *Janaganer Sange (Dwitiya Khanda)* & Chandra Bipan, Mukherjee Aditya, Mukherjee Mridula: *India After Independence*

⁷⁶ In January 1977 the leaders of the Congress (O), Jan Sangha, Bharatiya Lok Dal and Socialist Party decided to merge into a new party called the Janata Party. The strength of this combination was further raised when such prominent leaders of the Congress like Jagjivan Ram, H. N. Bahuguna and Nandini Satpathy defected from the Congress and joined the Janata Party. This combination was made to pose a concerted opposition to the 'authoritarian' Indira Congress. During the *Lok Sabha* Election of 1977 this Janata Party made its electoral alliance with the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), Akali Dal and the CPI(M) and achieved a landslide victory. (Chandra Bipan, Mukherjee Aditya, Mukherjee Mridula: *India After Independence*)

forces and against the forces of anti-communism or for implementation of a common progressive programme as in the case of the Kerala united-front government".⁷⁷

The opposition front, however, was consolidated by the combination of the six left parties and the Janata Party. It was a loose type of front in which each party issued a separate manifesto clarifying its stand and programme. Nevertheless, unity could be achieved on their single-minded objective to defeat the ruling party and save the country from a repetition of autocratic rule. P. Sundarayya, General Secretary of the CPI(M), explained the logic of this accord:

(In the Janata Party) "all sorts of party representing capitalists, reactionaries and others joined together and we know that they could not provide an alternative progressive government. But they are less dangerous and they give respect to democratic values. This forced us to put all other problems aside and join hands with the Janata Party to fight against the Congress."⁷⁸

Seat adjustments were made according to this logic. One opposition candidate was given in each seat so that the votes for the opposition candidate could not get divided.

In the election, the Congress which had lost its moral ground to run a democratic government and now received popular verdict to depart. The Janata Party and its allies achieved a fabulous victory of 330 out of 542 seats in the *Lok Sabha*. The Congress trailed behind having a total of only 154 seats. Indira Gandhi was defeated. For the first time since independence a non-Congress government under the leadership of the Janata

⁷⁷ Krishnan N. K.: Our Party's Electoral Tactics *Party Life* (February 22, 1977)

⁷⁸ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (February 8, 1977)

Party was installed at the Centre.⁷⁹ The CPI too lost its popular acceptability by tailing behind an unpopular ruling party. In West Bengal the CPI contested in 8 seats but won not in a single one.

The Assembly Election which came within short succession produced the same result. In the perspective of the experience of the *Lok Sabha* Election the adjustment with the Congress was no longer possible, as it had been admitted by the CPI leaders:

“In the changed political situation any understanding with the Congress would have been interpreted as an attempt to restore congress rule or at best to form a Congress-CPI coalition government and would not look like an attempt to forge bigger unity of left and democratic forces. That would have led to further isolation from the basic masses and the left and democratic people of the state.”⁸⁰

In this context, the CPI had to fight independently. But the result was miserable. The party contested in 63 seats in West Bengal but won only 2.⁸¹ This was a serious lesson for the party which faced a major rift on this issue. The report reviewing the elections admitted of some organizational faults like the dearth of partisan feeling among large number of comrades, the growing tendency of violation of the party discipline and party norms which seriously contributed to the failure of the party. Even graver was the failure to adopt a correct political principle.

⁷⁹ Ibid. March, 1977

⁸⁰ W. Bengal: Review of Assembly Election-A note prepared by the State Executive Committee *Party Life* (February 22, 1977), pp. 1-2

⁸¹ *Election Results of West Bengal-Statistics and Analysis*, published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee

Bishwanath Mukherjee who during the period of Emergency maintained a voice of dissidence against his party's pro-Congress line, found the roots of this electoral disaster in the party's wrong line of collaboration throughout the '70s:

"During the election of 1971 in most parts of the country our party contested in collaboration with the Congress. The same line was followed during the Assembly elections of 1972. The mistaken policy of the party can be traced from these days.

...By that time the country was passing through a severe economic crisis. The labouring class along with the common masses were fuelled with discontent against such unbearable condition. It was during this period that a series of movements were organized in jute industry, cotton mills, coal mines, engineering works and other industries; strikes were called at the local and state levels; and finally the historic rail strike burst in. ...Our party took part in those struggles. But it did nothing to perform the very essential duty of putting all those struggling masses together. Throughout the period our party was haunted by the idea that the formation of an anti-Congress platform would politically be a wrong step. ...Thus guided by a wrong policy, the party lost a golden opportunity of forming a united left front and by making the dissident Congressmen a part of it.

...The situation worsened after the declaration of the Emergency. Persuaded by another wrong conception that the Emergency was meant for the destruction of the reactionary forces, the party lent full support to it and this decision had a debilitating impact on its popular base. True, the party opposed some features of the Emergency. But since it politically sided with the Indira Government, those occasional oppositions could not appeal to the people. It was branded as the collaborator of a tyrannical ruling group and, therefore, was anti-people by nature.

Then the Emergency loosened its grip over the country and the elections were declared. But the traumatic effect of the Emergency was clear in the growing unpopularity of the Congress, particularly among the democratic elements of the country. Nevertheless, our party did not take care of this popular spirit. An important group of Congressmen including Jagjivan Ram, Bahuguna, Nandini Satpathi too defected from their party.

But our party failed to utilize that occasion too. It neither itself left the Congress nor took the initiative to mobilize the democratic elements in the Congress to form an anti-Congress forum.”

These series of ‘wrongs’, in Mukherjee’s opinion, plunged the party into disaster. He commented:

“There are some historical moments in which popular consciousness undergoes a transformation. At that critical juncture the decisions and actions of a political party become crucial in socially legitimizing it for a long time to come. The election spelt such a trial for us. At a time, when the popular imagination demanded strong action to bring the tyrannical regime of the Congress to an end, our party’s electoral alliance with the Congress immediately figured it as an instrument for reinstallation of an autocratic rule. This had a debilitating impact upon our support base among the people who not only defeated us in the election but also distanced themselves from our party.”⁸²

At the Party Congress of Bhatinda in 1978 the error in supporting the Emergency was noted in the ‘Political Review Report’:

“It is true that it was our party which fought against the excesses of emergency the most. But despite this, our party’s independent image was blurred and it became identified with the then ruling Congress Party. For this we had to pay heavily in the post-emergency *Lok Sabha* election, while on the other hand those parties which did very little but which had “opposed” the emergency got big dividends in the election.”⁸³

A part of the CPI leadership in West Bengal that had already been critical of Dange’s stand on the Emergency was widely supported by the leaders from other states as well. Dange,

⁸² *Sampratik Nirbachaner Paryalochona* (A Review of The Recent Election) – presented at the meeting of the West Bengal State Committee of the CPI, July 22-24, 1977

Collected from *Bishwanath Mukherjee: Tattwa O Sangramer Pratik*, pp. 169-173

⁸³ Political Review Report – *Documents of the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of India, Bhatinda*, 1978, pp. 20-21

however, continued his pro-Congress approach and was finally expelled from the party on the ground that he was defying the party line.⁸⁴

While the psychological alienation from the masses distanced the CPI from their constituencies, the CPI(M) had its strength on this count of popular confidence. Admittedly, the CPI(M) too had failed to provide effective leadership to the people during the Emergency. The image of the saviour of people in distress that the CPI(M) had acquired in the past was no longer true in the mid '70s. Rather the lack of organizational strength in the face of organized repression became exposed to the public. However, unlike the CPI, the CPI(M) was at least a passive victim of fascist terror and did not play opportunism. Rather it carried on social leadership. It left the political banner but continued with mobilization over all popular issues. Thus it could enliven and consolidate among people a spirit of protest that formed the core of communist politics in the state over decades. During the '50s such a policy of political teaching through social solidarity paid the undivided Communist Party rich dividends on the refugee issue. A group of destitute people who had been charged with nationalist ethos but were utterly disillusioned with the national parties discovered among the leftists a sense of responsibility and commitment, and in consequence accepted their class politics as a way of political life. In the critical days of '70s also, by sincerely sharing the sufferings of the masses the CPI(M) could establish its difference

⁸⁴ Mukherjee Bishwanath: *Bibhedkamider Swarup Chinun* (Identify The Separationists), July 29, 1981
 Collected from *Bishwanath Mukherjee. Tattwa O Sangramer Pratik*, pp. 183-4

from the oppressive power-mongers like the Congress and its allied parties. This sincerity was paid back in electoral field. This psyche played a decisive role in the Assembly election.

As far as the adjustments among the political partners were concerned, the process of the Assembly election did not mark a happy beginning for the CPI(M). The political understanding between the Janata Party and the Left Front that produced a miracle in the *Lok Sabha* election broke down on the eve of the contest of power in the Assembly. A serious discord appeared over seat adjustments. The Janata Party which boasted of its unprecedented victory at the Centre was not in a mood to negotiate with the CPI(M) and its allies, who formed the left combination. It did not agree to offer more than 90 seats to the Left Front against the latter's demand of a minimum 48% of the total Assembly seats, i.e., 145 seats. The CPI(M), on the other hand, confident of its strength after the experience of the *Lok Sabha* election, made it categorically clear that it would contest the elections independently if an electoral alliance was not possible. Finally, the Left Front decided to fight all the 294 seats alone.⁸⁵ It was a miscalculated venture on the part of the Janata Party which leaving a popular party in the state paid heavily by winning only 29 seats.

In this situation the CPI(M) and its partners in the Left Front appeared to be the most viable alternative. For the CPI(M)-led Left Front that included Forward Bloc, RSP, RCPI, MFB and BBC the election brought a landslide victory. Within the Front the popular verdict identified the CPI(M) as the 'people's party'. Unlike in the previous UF ministries, the CPI(M) this

⁸⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (May 1977)

time had a clear majority having won 178 of the 294 Assembly seats. With its other partners in the Left Front the CPI (M) now enjoyed a solid majority of 232 seats. The Congress was reduced to virtual non-existence in the Assembly with only 20 seats.⁸⁶ This marked the beginning of the Left Front Government in West Bengal that has been enjoying an uninterrupted continuation for nearly three decades through successive electoral victories in the state.

After 1977

The year 1977 which symbolized the triumph of democratic radicalism in West Bengal also marked the beginning of an utterly successful experiment in coalition politics. The Left Front Government which was brought to power in 1977 has managed to stay there during the next few decades winning five Assembly elections in a row. The organizational strength of the CPI(M) had provided the Left Front a strong foundation in their successful pursuit of parliamentarism.

The origin of this coalition strategy can be placed back to the refugee movement of the 1950s. In addition, the two phases of coalition government in the state in 1967 and 1969 imparted significant political lessons. Both of these coalitions were, however, loose amalgamation of heterogeneous forces, bound by the only point of agreement in anti-congressism. But the Left Front that came to power in 1977, despite having parties from different brands of leftism, had a common vision of an

⁸⁶ *Election Results of West Bengal-Statistics and Analysis*, published by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), West Bengal State Committee

alternative government, This front made successful popular mobilization on many occasions before 1977 and established an uninterrupted Left Front rule upto 2011. The transformation of the Communist Parties as a consequence of this long tenure of power, however, demands a full-length enquiry. What role the radical rhetoric plays in such altered circumstances and the question of ideological cohesion are issues that can be addressed in another full-length narrative.

Conclusions

This work intended to explore the relentless effort of the communist movement of West Bengal to retain the radical rhetoric characteristic of a revolutionary force, even after the Communist Party entered electoral politics and parliamentarism. In none of the documents of the Communist Party before and after the split in the communist movement in 1964 there was any concrete programme of turning electoral mobilization into a revolutionary initiative. Yet, in none of the policy statements made by the party the revolutionary ambition was entirely abandoned. To the extent that this work calls attention to this ambivalence creating ideological tensions and deflections from the pursuit of its revolutionary aims, this work is somewhat presentminded.

It is, however, not unreasonable for a student of history to look back into the past from the hindsight of the present. Yet, it does not seem that the kind of reformist attitudes that have become pronounced over time always dominated the thinking of the Communist Parties. The radical ideology for them, as Chapter 6 shows, was a matter of faith and at the same time a much needed counterpoint against the challenge of extremist radicalism from within the communist movement. Even before the Maoist challenge surfaced in the late 1960s, there were communists who preferred the insurrectionary evocations of the Ranadive line. While such groups tried to uphold the value of underground politics and unmitigated militancy, either their dominance in the party was temporary or they eventually survived as marginal elements. Ranadive after a brief tenure as the party chief had to leave the forefront. The Maoists after

their vigorous challenge to both the State and their allegedly 'reformist' counterpart in the communist movement became minuscule and even dissipated. Their eclipse was largely due to their failure to combat the physical force of the State. But, as the experiences of the various Naxalite leaders and ordinary cadres showed, confusion about and even disapproval of the party line remained within their party circle. It was also an ideological and organizational failure of the Naxalites to evolve a feasible and sustainable programme of mass mobilization in the contemporary situation of West Bengal. On the other hand, the other factions of the Communist Party, which were firmly anchored in constitutionalism, gradually thrived as the dominant political force of the State of West Bengal. What is, however, puzzling is the way the 'constitutional' Communist Parties in the state, even after achieving spectacular success in electoral politics, continued to nurture the idea of breaking it apart. What is more interesting is that these constitutional parties differed from each other in terms of the degree of their constitutionalism and justified that difference with reference to their revolutionary ideology. The first split of the Communist Party in 1964, as Chapter 6 shows, was the outcome of the clash on the degree of constitutionalism. Neither the CPI nor the CPI(M) had any immediate scheme for the revolutionary overthrow of the Indian State. Both agreed over the principle of electoral participation. But they differed in their assessment of the Indian State and their expectation from the parliamentary institutions to set the backdrop of a revolutionary change. Nevertheless, both of them nourished an ambition for a revolution, which was distant but at the same time, distinct in their vision. This dichotomy between the ideological allegiance and the political practice of the party has been explained in terms of the image the party leadership sought to project before the people as well as its own ranks.

One of the central concerns of this work has been to trace the popular face of communism. In this regard, the CPI(M) achieved great distinction by emerging as the most dominant party in leftwing mobilization in the State of West Bengal. The story of its successful popular mobilization is linked with the failure of the Congress Government to live up to the emancipatory ideals of the anti-colonial movement. Disillusionment about the Congress rule caused the alienation of the people from a party that had been traditionally viewed as the symbol of the country's nationalism. In this context communism became a viable political alternative. The popular acceptance of communism was moulded by the multiplicity of communist identity in the State. Communism had to reconcile with nationalism. When a group of freedom fighters were initiated into communism, they found no essential contradiction between the ideology of class and the principle of self-determination. Rather they spreaded the war of liberation from the front of political fetters to that of economic slavery. After independence the entry of the communists into electoral politics kept them in conformity with the process of nation building guided by the nation-state. The communists were, however, critics of nationalism too, particularly as pointers of an 'oppressive' Central Government. By criticizing the discriminatory and autocratic policies of the Central Government about the refugees from East Pakistan, the inadequate allocation of revenue for West Bengal, the capricious demarcation of the territorial boundaries of the state the communists attempted to draw on a regional identity sharpened by a sense of being perpetually wronged by an unsympathetic Central Government. In the process the Communist Parties, particularly the CPI(M), acquired the image of the protector of the state's interests.

But, while espousing regional interests was one important ingredient in the popularity of communism in a political context vitiated by over-centralization, the Communist Party still figured in the public space most prominently as the messenger of a new age. The vision of a possible revolutionary change continued to dominate its worldview. Admittedly, while voting for the communists, the voters were not always expecting an immediate and complete social transformation. In fact, the consistent emphasis in the party literature on the lack of readiness of the masses to participate in revolutionary movements appeared to be a device of the Communist Parties to legitimize their concentration on parliamentarism. Again for the purpose of augmenting the vote bank, the Communist Party had to make alliances with some of the social groups which never endorsed the idea of revolutionary change in the sense the communists understood it. From the engagement with parliamentarism, it seems that the party did not have any revolutionary plan to execute in near future. Yet, to popular imagination, the communists continued to retain a revolutionary image despite many strands of reformism in its political practice. A long history of struggle and self-sacrifice, a well advocated and solidly grounded theory of fundamental change made it possible. The sustained programme of land reform for equitable redistribution of land, the relentless struggle for ensuring social justice for industrial workers and other professional groups created an unmistakable brand of populism for communism in the State. This populism was articulated in a language of class. The communists made a sustained effort to expose the roots of a malicious socio-economic system and its allegedly protective political cover in the class character of the existing state. The remedial, therefore, was suggested in the decomposition of this

class base of the State, and the immediate relief was sought through limited parliamentary reforms. The promise of a fundamental change, compounded with the performance of the communists as partners of the people's struggle, made the revolutionary ideology of the communists practising constitutionalism humane, feasible and thus acceptable to the people.

While the revolutionary image of the Communist Party flared up the imagination of the people, the ideal of revolution was a matter of faith for the party ranks. Hence any faltering in commitment or adjustments with the ideological purity invited serious kinds of dissension and confusion at the various levels of party members. The splits of the Communist Party, though these often took place in an atmosphere vitiated by personal rivalry and acute factionalism, were legitimized by the claim to represent the true version of communism by rival factions. Shortcomings in the doctrinal framework of the Communist Parties could be read as their failure to maintain the normative standards of communist policies. More fearsome of course, was the apprehension of a challenge from within. Therefore, apart from the compulsion of living up to the image, the party also shared the burden of responsibility to justify its actions before its ranks. Not only could a breakaway group from the party refuse to comply with electoral practices but also among those who participated in election, the spirit of vigilance against the 'mud of reformism' or 'too much constitutionalism' did not die down. The possibility of radical take over was a standing threat to a party which indulged in constitutional activities.

These two compulsions at popular and party levels explain the urgency of the Communist Party or Parties to adhere to the 'ism' of revolution even when in practice the revolutionary aim

remained practically elusive. The problem of combining a revolutionary identity with an electoral praxis was, however, not unique in the case of the communists in West Bengal. In many other European and Asian contexts, as suggested in the Introduction, the communists who failed to organize a revolution but tried to get entry into the national politics evolved a strategy that combined revolutionary dreams with electoral mobilization. The same kind of experiment was successfully implemented in Kerala and Tripura – two Indian states. The communists of West Bengal followed similar strategies. But the kind of success the communists of West Bengal have been able to achieve outshined the political record of those states where the communists and their allies attained massive electoral victory but failed to remain in power for three decades at a stretch.

The success of the communists, the CPI(M) in particular, in West Bengal was rooted in a fine blending of a radical rhetoric and a calculated projection of its electoral achievements. The balancing strategy had been a feature of communist politics in India ever since the birth of the party. The guideline which Lenin formulated in his 'Colonial Thesis' in 1920 for the new-born communist parties working under colonial conditions clearly stressed the priority of the nationalist struggle and consequently endorsed the alliance with the anti-imperialist national bourgeoisie. Yet, the alliance was legitimized as a part of the anti-imperialist programme of socialism. In other words, nationalism and socialism were considered not as contradictory but complementary propositions. In the post-colonial period too the participation of the Communist Party in electoral politics, the consequent empowerment of the party in the parliamentary system of the state as well as the party's endeavour to create a healthy democracy within the framework of the Indian

Constitution were often justified as a preparatory phase for a revolutionary upheaval. The execution of the pious wishes of the Constitution was considered as the 'common minimum programme' to be shared with the like-minded parties in the parliamentary system. But the long-term and final objective of the so-called constitutional communist parties was never lost sight of, in turn sustaining the parties' revolutionary identity. Even in implementing the reformist programme of the Left Front in West Bengal the communists were critical about the restrictions that the Central Government imposed on the states. The idea of the impossibility of achieving the socialist dreams within the existing constitutional framework had always been implicit in communist thinking.

The importance of electoral mobilization in creating a popular base for the communists cannot be doubted, even as they believed that the inevitable failure of the class state to address the needs of the common people would be a learning experience for them. An awareness of the limitations of the constitutional mechanism was necessary to make them conscious about the needs for a revolutionary transformation. At the same time, 'immediate relief' for the people within the parliamentary framework remained an equally important concern. On the one hand, the communists successfully represented popular and at times regional aspirations in the parliamentary bodies; on the other hand, they taught the people the language of class war.

Not unnaturally, this strategy produced dilemma creating different party lines at different points of time. The communist movement passed through a long phase of outlawed existence

and sometimes assumed such an insurrectionary form as to become a serious threat to the existing political order. The excess of bloodshed and adventurism caused by Ranadive line and the Naxalite insurgency, however heroic and inspiring they might be, at times evoked among many of the supporters fear of violence and instability. The communist activists too under the pressure of police repression failed to reach out to the people. The electoral mobilization, on the contrary, gave them a legal platform to propagate their ideas and a modicum of power to implement their programme. In other words, while participation in constitutional politics seemed to be a learning experience teaching its ultimate failure, it still enabled the parties to reach out to the people. Consequently, the insurrectionary activities were repudiated or avoided not because they aimed at a wrong objective but because they proved to be premature and misdirected. There was, therefore, no expressed dilution of the socialist goal. Nor were there any illusions about the peaceful transition to communism which would be achieved only through the intervention of the revolutionary forces at the final phase of class struggle. In this scheme of thinking parliamentarism, while it engaged the Communist Parties, had limited relevance.

This revolutionary project, however elusive, served two important purposes. First, it had an immediate electoral benefit. The failures of the Communist Parties to fulfil the popular expectations in the electoral system were accounted for by the limitations of the system itself. Such an explanation made the limitations of a revolutionary party in fulfilling its electoral promises tolerable. On the other hand, the promise to go beyond the electoral system gave the communists an added strength

against their contestants. Thus the empowerment of the leftist forces within the electoral system as an essential prerequisite for the ultimate objective could be ideologically defended.

The second purpose was, however, more important because it served to maintain the identity of the Communist Party. At one level, the doctrinal purity was essential for the party's belonging to the international communist movement. At another level, it enabled the party to combat the forces of radicalism from within. Parliamentarism was necessary for the survival of the party in a situation where the armed revolution seemed to be a remote possibility. But at the same time the rhetoric of revolution was indispensable for maintaining the party's revolutionary identity.

Besides, the cultivation of a revolutionary ambition within an electoral framework added a new dimension to the constitutional system of the state. The inner compulsions of the party's ideology and the party's history made it imperative for the communists in the state of West Bengal to sustain a revolutionary rhetoric. Yet, the refusal of a political group to look upon itself as a purely constitutional party, even while operating in a constitutional framework, gave the constitutional politics a new character. This made the position of the Communist Party very special in the national politics. As a party in opposition it posed a revolutionary challenge to the ruling establishment. If it would be a party in power there would be potentials for the creation of an alternative state order. Thus it implanted a political culture of revolution within a constitutional framework. The use of parliamentary instruments to promote revolutionary consciousness infused a radical spirit in

parliamentary politics. The popular urgency to elect a party which denied the ultimate workability of electoral politics reflected the popular acceptance of this way of politics. The history of the communist movement in West Bengal, therefore, was a story of the adaptation of a revolutionary doctrine to a regional context without liquidating its radical foundations. And out of this experiment emerged a radical culture in the democratic politics of the state.

APPENDIX

The 18-point programme undertaken by the First United Front Government (published in *People's Democracy* on March 5, 1967)

- i) The UF Government would strive to meet the primary needs of the people in respect of food, clothing, housing, education, health services and would ensure efficiency, economy and impartiality in the administration.
- ii) The UF Government would fight against corruption, nepotism in official spheres, profiteering, hoarding and blackmarketing, adulteration of food and medicine, amassing of ill-gotten wealth and all such anti-social activities.
- iii) Along with the administrative measures to fight corruption, the UF Government would undertake measures to promote production, particularly through land reforms.
- iv) The Government would undertake wholesale trade in paddy and rice, and strictly regulate distribution of essential commodities to rationalize price and eliminate wastage and corruption.
- v) Special emphasis would be given on creating new employment opportunities through economic development, social service and fostering industries, especially small and cottage industries.
- vi) The Government would take determined steps to improve the number and quality of primary and secondary schools; reform educational administration; promote literature, sports and cultural activities; and take care of the causes of the teachers, non-teaching staffs and students.
- vii) Best efforts should be provided to rehabilitate the displaced persons from East Pakistan to enable them to take their rightful place as fulfilled citizens of India.
- viii) The cause of labour and workers on whom production and economic development primarily depend would be given adequate support, and working conditions in the field and in factories would be substantially improved.
- ix) The UF was ready to recognize the rights of the minority communities to follow and preserve their faith, special culture, language and noble traditions. However, the Government would not

tolerate any propaganda or action that may lead to communal hatred, casteism, provincialism, linguistic fanaticism or any other evil to threaten national integrity.

- x) The Government would pay special attention to and improve the conditions of scheduled castes and tribes and backward sections of the people.
- xi) The special problems of women would receive due consideration.
- xii) The problems of Calcutta, the nerve-centre of Eastern India as also of under-developed regions such as Purulia, the Sundarbans and parts of North Bengal would receive special attention.
- xiii) The Government would take early steps to implement the resolutions adopted unanimously by the West Bengal State Assembly to make Bengali the official language of this state and Nepali the regional language of Darjeeling hill areas.
- xiv) The UF Government would recognize the rights of workers, peasants, teachers and employees of all categories to form unions and associations with a view to voicing their just demands and grievances and would not suppress the democratic and legitimate struggles of the people.
- xv) The UF was aware of the severe limitations imposed on the State Governments and its precarious dependence upon the Centre, and would strive to acquire more power and rights as well as revenue.
- xvi) The question of Berubari would be taken up with the Union Government.
- xvii) The Government would do everything for the preservation and strengthening of the sovereignty of the country.
- xviii) The Government would not rely on administrative machinery to implement the above policies but would seek active cooperation and association of the people. The local self-governing institutions and *panchayets* would be democratized and vitalized to truly represent the people and would be made more effective institutions free from corruption and nepotism.

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VI. Interviews

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-Biswas Anil (A leftist leader, who at the time of his death was the Secretary of the State Committee of the CPI(M), West Bengal)

-Chattopadhyay Prasanta (An ex-naxalite activist, currently a college professor and the editor of a periodical *Kaladhwani*)

-Mitra Shaibal (Naxalite leader of the '60s and the '70s and now Retired Professor)

-Mukherjee Arun Prosad (Former Director, C.B.I.; Former Director General of Police, West Bengal; Former Governor, Mizoram; Currently Member, Administrative Reforms Commission, Government of India)

-Samanta Amiya (Former Director General, Intelligence Branch, Government of West Bengal)

-Sinha Tushar (An activist of the CPI(M))

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The communist politics in West Bengal during the period 1947-77 provides a significant lesson in Marxist practice in post-colonial India. The failure of the Congress Party to live up to the emancipatory ideals of the anti-colonial movement disillusioned the people of West Bengal about Congress rule. The Communist Party, on the other hand, by organizing a series of mass movements on such critical issues as the rehabilitation of the refugees from East Pakistan, recurrent food crisis, landlessness of the peasants, exploitation of the labourers in industrial sectors imaged itself as the protectors of the ordinary citizens of the state. Consequently, it catalyzed a political alternative to the Congress by forming a government in the state after the Assembly elections of 1977. While achieving power through elections, the communists, however, entertained a vision of demolishing that electoral power structure. The victory in the electoral contest did not end the party's revolutionary pursuit. In other words, the communists in the state made a relentless effort to maintain a careful balance between its revolutionary objective and electoral praxis.

This book has raised question: why was the revolutionary rhetoric so essential for a party which has practically embedded itself into constitutional politics? The answer has been sought in terms of the party's relations with the people of the state, to its own ranks and to the international course of communist politics. The popular imagination of a communist party and the normative standard of the communist movement made the projected revolution a political imperative for the communists in West Bengal. While the prospect and even survival of the Communist Party in the state depended on its successful adaptation to the electoral politics, the fidelity to a frame of ideas would legitimize its identity. The book has focused on this delicate balance of ideological compulsion and political necessity.

Besides, this peculiar blending of revolutionary ideal and electoral practice has implanted in West Bengal a political culture of revolution in a constitutional framework. The book has also traced this process of the emergence of a radical culture in the democratic politics of the state.



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